# Otherman’s War

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## I

Kymeros heard the alarms go off the morning his parents died. He was a young otherman, only a short time away from turning into an adolescent. A grayish skinned insectoid with two arms and legs, he would have his wings and antennae after the final transformation. It was what he had been looking forward to.

He hadn’t been thinking about the war, although he probably should have been. It had been going on for decades. Like most youth, he’d paid little attention to politics. But adulthood was just around the corner.

Kymeros lived in a city in the West. The West, a society which championed the individual, had fought multiple conflicts with the East, a culture which valued the group. Competition for resources and arguments

over ideology had rendered peace between the two nations all but impossible.

When overt conflict wasn’t happening, spies on both sides cased their enemies. Over time, spy technology had evolved into the thought device. An artificial form of telepathy, the thought device had been designed to communicate with agents in the field. Then, it became weaponized. Thought devices had been used to instill temporary insanity in populations, causing riots and murders. Enemies had brought down cities with no casualties on their side.

The West had discovered and retaliated using the same methods. Both sides developed interference to counteract the thought devices. Soon after, deadlier bombs were developed, ones that could disintegrate entire areas. Energy shields were generated around cities to protect against the threat of annihilation. And

so it went until, at last, the cities of both nations existed in a state of perpetual siege. Always on alert for the next bombing or thought attack. Now, the alarms were going off, and he knew the siege was being challenged again.

Kymeros stood, stretched, and looked around. He was in his parents' egg chamber. A few eggs were in the incubator, future brothers and sisters. He checked to make sure they were secure, and then stepped out into the main room of their dwelling.

His father was getting his gun ready. When the alarms went off, all citizens were expected to help defend the city. His father looked like him, only with the full wings, antennae, and muscles of adulthood. A glance off to the side confirmed his mother was in the kitchen. Otherman females looked like the males, only more slender and with larger abdomens. Currently, hers

wasn’t quite as swollen since she had just laid her latest clutch of eggs.

“Kymeros, stay here with your mother,” his father ordered.

Kymeros went to her, and they ducked behind the counter. He didn’t argue; although his life had been relatively peaceful until now, he knew better than to argue. Parents educated their children until they reached adulthood, and Kymeros had had fear of the East drilled into him.

Kymeros and his mother watched as his father went into the street. From where they were, they could see citizens gathering in the streets. Local military rallied around them, and began giving orders. The adults took to the air, over the streets.

Kymeros stood and ventured a closer look outside. The buildings of his city looked largely similar, differing

mostly in size.  Even with the West emphasizing individual expression as part of their culture, architecture showed little variation.  Instead, othermen of the West expressed themselves through music, literature or science. The dwellings looked like the hives of termites on Earth.

At the edge of the city, a group of Eastern othermen flew into view.  They threw disintegration bombs, which seemed to explode in the air.  What actually happened, however, was the bombs impacted the energy shield surrounding the city.

Then, one of the enemies flew near, thought device in hand.  Activating it, the Eastern soldiers sent thoughts of killing and death to the Westerners.  Kymeros saw some of his neighbors break away, and point their weapons at their fellows. Shots rang out, and othermen died.

But the Westerners had prepared for this as well. One of the soldiers activated a machine he had, which emitted a piercing electronic shriek. The radio waves of the interference machine sought to cancel out the waves of the enemy's thought device. Such tactics prevented wholesale slaughter.

The Easterners responded by increasing the intensity of their waves. Although they couldn't get through the shields due to their inadequate bomb supply, they would still seek to cause some damage to their opponents. Usually, neither side wanted to engage in suicide runs. They were generally more interested in victory than genocide.

Desperate individuals, however, existed on both sides, and it would seem these were among them.

The fighting waves of thought and interference devices presented themselves as pressure in Kymeros'

head.  Indeed, in the heads of all othermen close enough. His mother began to tremble and moan in agony.  He reached out and held her.

Outside, othermen both inside and outside the shield began to fall from the sky.  His mother screamed and his own head started swimming.  The Easterners were putting their device at maximum capacity.  They wanted to overwhelm the minds of their enemies, but would also damage themselves.

Such action would be as much suicide as murder. But, while rare, it was being increasingly seen among Easterners, who were taught to value their nation over their own lives.  Kymeros' world grew dark around him, and for a time, he knew no more.

Kymeros regained consciousness some time later. He had collapsed to the floor, still holding his mother.

He shook her gently, but she didn’t respond. He tried a few more times before he realized she had died.

The thought device, when its intensity became enough to kill, left no mark. Its waves simply overwhelmed the nerve impulses in the brain, causing it to shut down. Moments later, the body died as well, due to receiving no autonomic stimulation.

That was the science of it. The reality was Kymeros had experienced death for the first time. Gingerly, he set her aside. Moving automatically, not even processing the loss yet, he went outside to find his father. He needed to know. Together, they would find a way to…

A pile of dead othermen were being examined in the street by the military. Outside the city, the Eastern squad also lay dead. The Westerners would eventually lower the shield long enough to retrieve them. But first, they would tend to their own.

“Excuse me,” Kymeros told the nearest soldier. “I’m looking for my father.”

“Was he one of the citizen volunteers?” the soldier asked.

“Yes.”

The soldier looked down. “I’m sorry. There were no survivors.”

Kymeros blinked and stared for several minutes. He was an orphan. He and the eggs back inside. Alone. In one day, they were both taken.

A crackle sounded above him. The shield had been turned off. Othermen warriors flew outside the city perimeter, retrieved the bodies, and came back inside.

“Commander Morgos,” one of them called.

“That’s me,” the soldier, Morgos, said. “What’s your name?”

“Kymeros.”

The soldiers landed and one of them walked up. He held the body of an Easterner. Kymeros realized it was about a foot taller than the average male height. Indeed, all the bodies were, and the Westerners had a hard time carrying them.

“So, it’s true,” Morgos muttered. “The Easterners have started using growth enhancing drugs. Making them larger and stronger…”

Kymeros heard part of the explanation, and then walked closer to the pile of Western bodies. Among them, he saw his father. His worst fears had been confirmed.

Unable to hold back grief any longer, he buried his face in his hands. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been so shocked. After all, the war had been going on for years. It had touched everyone. There wasn’t an otherman alive anymore who hadn’t fought in the war, worked for

the industry supporting the war, or lost someone in the war.

This time, however, was different.

This time it was him.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. It was Morgos.

“Grieve,” the older otherman said gently. “But then take your anger, your anguish, and direct it back. Remember, the East did this.”

He remembered.

## II

Years passed. Kymeros, after metamorphosing into adulthood, joined the military. The eggs left by his parents were given to other families, as was the standard procedure in those situations. Morgos took him under

his wing.  Eventually, while the former transitioned into a political career, the latter rose to the rank of general. Meanwhile, the war dragged on.

Kymeros sat in a public restaurant, sipping a fermented drink he had grown fond of.  He was currently on leave, but would soon return to duty.  Over the years, he had fought in multiple cities, countering Eastern thought devices, leading bombing raids and occasionally even engaging in hand to hand combat. Who knew what his next assignment would entail?

“General?”

He turned around and saw Commander Drallos. One of his younger siblings, Drallos was the only one he had kept in contact with.  The younger otherman had followed in Kymeros’ footsteps, and had even fought alongside him. He had learned to use thought devices himself, although Kymeros had too much loathing of

them to do the same.  He used them against the enemy, but reluctantly.

Though their relationship was more professional than personal, Kymeros had grown fond of him in recent years.  The other siblings worked in various civilian capacities, but Kymeros didn't know much about them. All adults picked their career and were trained directly by their employers. Consequently, their social and family lives typically followed similar patterns.

"Commander Drallos," he greeted with a slight smile.  "What brings you here?"

"The Western council is requesting your presence," Drallos told him.  He looked a little sheepish.  "I figured I'd find you here."

Kymeros had very little in the way of a personal life. He had never taken a mate. He had few friends.  He had dedicated his entire life to the war.  Ever since the death

of their parents, Kymeros had made it his sole purpose to end the Eastern nation. Consequently, the only real pleasure he allowed himself was occasionally drinking alone in this bar, near the main Western military base.

"You know me well," Kymeros remarked. "Are they in the main chamber?"

The West was ruled by an elected body of legislators. Morgos was among them. By contrast, the East was ruled directly by their military and supported by appointed bureaucrats.

"Only Morgos," Drallos told him. "This is to be kept confidential."

Now, that was interesting. Kymeros had had little dealings with covert operations. He had always preferred to fight in the open. Still, for his old mentor to entrust something secretive to him suggested great importance.

Drallos led Kymeros out of the bar. The two took to the skies, flying above the hive like buildings, but still well below the protective shield. Looking at the streets below, Kymeros could see all roads leading to a central tower, the offices of the Western council.

They flew over the streets, landing back on the ground. At the front door, they were checked by security, cleared, and escorted to a private conference room.

Morgos, now the most senior member of the Western council, sat at a table. Beside him stood the Pilot, a robot that had been sent out into space before any otherman. After encountering some type of light energy out there, he had been retrieved, and found to have gained sentience. Since then, the Pilot had been serving the West as a source of knowledge and council.

“General, thank you for being so prompt,” Morgos greeted.

“Of course, sir.  Does this pertain to my next assignment?”

“It does.  And I admit, the assignment will be a delicate one.  It requires someone I can trust completely.”

He looked at the Pilot, and nodded.  The robot began speaking in a synthetic male voice.

“This Thought War has taken a massive toll on both sides.  Such a toll, in fact, some scientists believe your entire species is in jeopardy.”

The population had slowly but surely been whittled down over the decades.  Especially with the advent of the bombs. While energy shields provided some protection, they could eventually fail in the face of intense, repeated bombing.

“We have received an encrypted transmission from Mariamne,” the Pilot continued.

“Where?” Kymeros asked.  The name wasn’t familiar to him.

“A small island in the middle of the ocean,” the Pilot explained.  “About a week ago, an Easterner calling himself Thavros claimed he was a scientist there, and that Mariamne is a biological research facility.”

“Where they’re making the growth hormones for their soldiers?” Kymeros asked.  The Western Deceivers had searched the Eastern countryside in vain for their research base.  It made sense to locate it on an island in the middle of the ocean

“So he claims,” Morgos said.  “He also claims he is going to defect.”

“Obvious trap,” Kymeros snorted.

“Perhaps not,” the Pilot said.  “He sent a detailed description of the facility.  He also sent a study they are doing on the genome.  Evidently, the East is looking to

move past administering drugs to its forces. Instead, there is research into genetic engineering. They want to breed othermen who are naturally larger and more aggressive."

"I'm no scientist, but it all sounds rather farfetched," Kymeros said.

"Nevertheless, I have analyzed the data," the Pilot continued. "It is possible."

"The thing is, why would this Thavros tell us?" Morgos continued. "Unless he really wants to work for the welfare of our entire species. Not just the East."

"He has requested we send our finest scientists to Mariamne," Morgos said. "They have also agreed to allow a military escort."

"Is that where I come in, sir?" the general asked.

"You and Drallos assemble a squadron and head to our east coast port in the next two days. The Pilot and I

will send a group of scientists there to meet you.  Travel to Mariamne on a civilian boat.”

While the othermen could fly long distances, even the strongest could never hope to cross the ocean.  So they used engine powered ships to traverse the distance.

“At the first sign of ambush or betrayal, you are authorized to take whatever action you see fit,” Morgos continued.  “However, if this is a chance to make peace, even with part of the Eastern people, it behooves us to try.”

The counselor looked at the younger otherman.  The one he had known, watched and encouraged for years now.

“I trust you, Kymeros.  Don’t let me down.  Dismissed.”

Kymeros and Drallos touched down in the port city. A massive dock covered the beach, and multiple metal craft floated in the water.

Their handpicked soldiers landed behind them. Kymeros let his brother get them in formation. He looked out on the water. The red sun shone overhead, and their solar system's other planet, Eurobus, had started to appear in the sky again.

A small planetoid with an irregular orbit, Eurobus only appeared in the sky for a few months every two centuries. In the past, its appearance in the sky had excited or frightened the superstitious. They saw it as an omen of great changes to come.

Now, it appeared once more. At a time when great change may well be underway. The general was, by nature, strictly practical. He sought logical explanations

for everything, which of course meant answers not invoking the supernatural or superstition. Still…

"General? Are you ready?"

He looked up and to the right. The Pilot stood on the deck of one of the ships.

"The scientists are assembled," the robot continued. "All is in readiness."

"All right," Kymeros said, addressing his men for the first time. "Let's move out. We'll get settled in, and draw up a schedule for watches and other duties."

He flew up on deck, and Drallos followed with the others. Then, the ship began to slowly move away from the port. Appearing to be a civilian fishing boat, it would cruise at a leisurely pace, taking longer to reach Mariamne than it would take at top speed. But they would exercise caution and draw as little attention as

possible. Even if Thavros was what he said he was, he still didn’t speak for the entire East.

III

The island appeared on the horizon. Soon, they pulled up to its dock. Kymeros saw a green fertile plateau. Multiple othermen farmers were planting crops and tilling the ground. Beyond was a clean, modern city. The general found himself surprised a supposed top secret facility would hide in plain sight. Granted, said plain sight was miles away from either mainland.

A single otherman waved at the boat as it gently came to a stop alongside the dock. Kymeros led his entourage in flying from the deck to the dock. Then, introductions were made.

“I’m General Kymeros, of the West,” he said. “You are Thavros?”

“Yes, I am,” he answered. “Welcome, general. And to you, Pilot. I’ve long wanted to meet you.”

“You asked for our help in an experiment,” the Pilot said. “I have our top Western specialist in genetics and medicine.”

Kymeros looked around. He saw no guards or obvious military buildings. No hangers or barracks. No devices looked like they would be capable of launching disintegration bombs or other projectiles. He mentioned this to the Eastern scientist.

“Most of the buildings are homes for the farmers,” Thavros explained. “They are refugees from cities on the mainland destroyed over the course of the war.”

“And they’re growing plants which provide ingredients for the drugs?” Kymeros asked.

“No, the drugs are completely synthetic,” Thavros said. “They’re simple farmers growing crops. The

occasional ship comes to export them and import supplies from the mainland. Incidentally, now that you are here, may I suggest you send your ship back? The only craft that usually comes here is an Eastern trading ship. Any other would cause suspicion."

"I don't think I'll do that," Kymeros said, with an edge to his voice. "It would leave us at your advantage."

"What the general means is, trust is difficult to establish, under the circumstances," the Pilot interjected. "We're intrigued by your proposal, but need to proceed slowly. Confidence in one another will come, but we'll need to show goodwill to one another for a while."

Kymeros didn't especially like the Pilot speaking for him. But he supposed the robot was right. He still wanted the East to pay, but if this possible defection was going to help them, he needed to be more diplomatic.

“We are here, at any rate,” he told Thavros in a milder tone. “But you must understand I’m curious as to why you would betray your own nation. After a life of serving them, no less.”

Thavros looked troubled. “I don’t wish to betray my country, general. When I said I was defecting, I only meant I didn’t want to help continue the war.”

He turned and motioned for them all to follow. They were led off the deck and through the fields. Kymeros looked on either side as he walked. Males and females toiled under the sun. While some were young and healthy, many were older, underweight, or had a haunted look in their eyes. He wondered if any of them had been in cities he’d attacked. He hated the East for the death of his parents. Had he caused some Easterner to feel the same way about him for the same reasons?

But he had never deliberately attacked civilians, he reminded himself. Nor did he engage in torture or unorthodox strategy. Collateral damage was terrible, but inevitable in war. And this one had been instigated by the East, not the West.

He wanted the East destroyed. But, he reflected, he really meant the Eastern government and army, not its people. When the war was over, these poor farmers and others like them would be free. Yes, they would be better off when freed from Eastern doctrines and taught Western ideals.

Speaking of Eastern doctrine, that's what Thavros was reflecting on, too.

"We are taught the importance of the group," Thavros said, as they moved through the fields. "And yet, the group itself has fallen to a fraction of what it was even thirty years ago. More and more refugees come on

the ship.  This island has good land, but can only hold so many.”

They reached the edge of the city, and strolled down its main boulevard. “I’ve been thinking a lot over the years.  What is a group but a collection of individuals? And what happens to the group after so many of its individuals are sacrificed? The survivors look to preserve themselves.  They become no different than the Westerners.”

“There are good and bad expressions of both philosophies,” the Pilot said.  “We have much to teach one another.”

They stopped at the tallest building in the city.

“As for teaching, this is where the real work happens,” Thavros said.  “The farm while, again, quite real, is also the cover.”

In the building were several labs. Thavros led them through computer labs, an infirmary, a room with multiple chemical hoods for compounding drugs and, surprisingly, egg chambers. They even contained eggs.

“For now, these incubators have Garoban crocodiles,” Thavros explained. “They have a simpler genome and should make for good test subjects.”

Then, he took them to another computer lab. Kymeros felt his adrenaline increase. A thought device was in the middle of the room. While no one currently operated it, how did they know he wouldn’t use it to brainwash them while they were asleep? Or just with their backs turned? His handpicked soldiers had been able to put up resistance to thought devices in previous battles. But it could also be used to just kill them.

He remembered his mother, dead in his arms. A hand went to his

sidearm.  Had this been, after all, an elaborate ruse to capture or kill the finest minds of the West?  It seemed like a lot of trouble, and Thavros had seemed genuine. But both sides had their Deceivers.

“Please,” Thavros said, holding up his hands placatingly.  “Yes, our thought device works.  But we use it among ourselves to share information.  Nothing more.”

“I see the need for multiple researchers to conduct separate experiments,” Kymeros conceded.  “But why not just hold meetings with one another?”

“We will,” Thavros assured them.  “Indeed, it will help keep the mind from getting oversaturated”

“The thought device may accelerate learning,” Drallos told his brother.  “However, minds can only hold so much.  At least consciously.  After a certain point, the brain simply won’t take on more.”

“What happens then?” Kymeros asked. “Brain damage?”

“No. The otherman in question just becomes unteachable.” Drallos smiled sheepishly. “Like how some students turn out to be unteachable by conventional methods. They just can’t, or won’t, retain the knowledge.”

“Using the thought device, I wish to impart what we’ve done so far,” Thavros explained. “I know what to transmit because I’m the director here. Then, we’ll begin normal research , but from the same starting point.”

“It will save time,” the Pilot admitted.

“How do I know once you activate that device, you won’t send us homicidal and suicidal thoughts?” Kymeros demanded.

“The Pilot can observe,” Thavros replied. “I’ve heard he is immune to thought devices.”

Apparently, the Pilot had been near a thought attack at some point years ago. He hadn’t succumbed, or even needed to resist. Evidenty, his brain waves operated at a different frequency than organics. Moreover, his metal exterior was harder for waves to penetrate than living cells.

“He’s only one,” Kymeros argued.

Thavros sighed, and shook his head. Then, he went to a workbench nearby. The Westerners tensed up, but he only picked up a type of metal helmet. Holding it over his head, he turned back to his guests.

“I don’t know yet if I can trust you either, general,” Thavros told him. “You dwell on the fact that I have a thought device. But what you haven’t noted is your men are still armed, and I’m not.”

“Surely you have guards.”

“No.  I can’t have even a squad here and still maintain the appearance of a peaceful refugee colony. So I’m going to trust you will not shoot me and take this if I don’t attack you with the thought device.”

“And what, exactly, is that?”

“A prototype.  Most experiments here are strictly biological.  But not all.  This helmet was designed to repel thought waves.  It both eliminates the need to generate interference, and protects from controlling or overloading the wearer’s thoughts.”

“An invaluable invention,” the Pilot said.  “If mass produced, possibly changing the face of the war.”

“The Eastern army will have it when the next ship comes,” Thavros continued.  “I’m committing treason just by making you aware of it, general.  But so there are

no secrets between us, I will let you have it while I convey my knowledge to your scientists."

"If it works."

"You must trust me at some point, general. Unless you simply want to return home. And in that, I've taken more risk than you. I've revealed where the East manufactures its growth hormone."

It was true. Kymeros, if he had discovered a Western scientist making proposals to the East, would have simply shot him. Thavros, no doubt, would meet a similar fate if his superiors found him out. There was only one way to find out how far the Easterner was willing to go.

He drew his weapon, but didn't point it at the scientist. Instead, he handed it to the Pilot.

"Keep him covered." Then, he slowly approached Thavros, hands up.

“Very well, Thavros.  Demonstrate the helmet working.  Then, allow me to wear it while you brief our people.  We’ll go from there.”

Thavros nodded, and handed the helmet to Kymeros. “Put it on when you feel the thought device’s influence begin.”

Kymeros took it and watched the scientist walk to the thought device.  With a wary eye on the general, Thavros activated it and began transmitting thoughts.

The Westerners felt the buzzing in their heads. Then a thought entered.  Put up your right hand.  A benign enough thought, but still clearly a command from the Easterner.  Some of the scientists’ hands went up right away.  The military, to Kymeros’ satisfaction, resisted.

He placed the helmet over his head.  To his surprise, he felt the buzzing leave his mind.  It was as if the

thought device had been shut off, but Thavros was still manning it.

The scientists dropped their right hands and raised their left. Some of his men did as well, but pulled their hands back down. Kymeros took off the helmet and felt the urge to raise his own hand. But when he dropped the helmet back on his head, the thought disappeared once more.

“Most impressive,” Kymeros told Thavros. “You may proceed.”

The Easterner nodded and made some adjustments on the machine. For a fraction for a second, he questioned the scientist’s integrity. But the Westerners all dropped their hands. And the scientists all looked like they were concentrating.

“Anything?” he asked his men.

“No, sir,” Drallos answered.

“The first step has been taken,” the Pilot said.

## IV

So the scientists began their work. The Pilot had the complete genome for both the crocodiles and the othermen in his memory. Consequently, he was able to identify the exact sequences for endogenous growth hormone and amygdala development.

Using replicators, the scientists assembled the genes for both of these traits. Then they were incorporated into a synthetic virus and ‘infected’ into crocodile eggs. The clutch of eggs hatched and grew in a few weeks to adulthood.

In a conference room, Kymeros, Thavros and the Pilot listened as an Eastern scientist explained the results.

“This brood already both appears both larger and more aggressive than the baseline species,” she said.

“Do you believe the effect to be a permanent one, Allree?” Thavros asked.

“In the ones where the virus took, yes,” she said. “However, the next step, the proof, will be to breed the successfully altered animals.”

“If the trait is passed on, it should be a success,” the Pilot said, nodding.

“And manufacturing drugs will no longer be necessary,” Thavros said. “It will be far more efficient in the long run.”

“Which still benefits the East when their children are treated,” Kymeros said. “Unless you are going to give it to the West as well, Thavros.”

The Easterner put his hands on the table. “General, when I said I needed your help, I meant it. For the

moment, I don’t intend to tell either side of the outside world.”

“You don’t think your superiors will get impatient after awhile?” Kymeros asked. “I would be.”

“The next Eastern ship will be here in a week. I will be sending a helmet with them. I will send one with your ships as well, as long as you agree to send it away.”

In the last several weeks, Kymeros had slowly grown to trust Thavros. At first, he had given his men strict orders to keep helmets on at all times. Eventually, he reached a point where he felt safe enough on the island. While he still questioned how much the director would really help the West or hinder the East, he at least no longer feared any deliberate violence here in Mariamne.

“Very well. I’ll have our ship give a report to Morgos, senior Western councilor. When they return, I’ll

have them approach from the far side of the island.  Just in case the Eastern ship is still here.”

“And I’ll send an encrypted message to the West, and let your councilor know what to expect.”

V

The crocodiles were bred and found to pass the traits on to their offspring.  Then, the beasts were killed, because they didn’t want a larger, more aggressive animal escaping into the wild.

The next experiment was to see if the reverse could be done.  This time, crocodiles were bred at normal size but with a suppressed amygdala.  These were discovered to be more docile, and able to be trained.  Allree and her team had them learn how to patrol the beach and eat from their hands without biting the othermen.

“Increased strength and increased submission,” Thavros said at another meeting. “Both could have potential in the event of…”

“What?” Kymeros asked.

“You have been here about a year?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“I’ve been monitoring news transmissions from both sides. There have been at least three battles in the past week alone.”

“Were the helmets deployed?”

“Yes, on both sides.”

Thavros frowned. “I know you never would have, but I do wish your side had waited till after the East started using them first.”

No, he wouldn’t have agreed to anything like that. What he said was, “Do you think your superiors suspect us of anything?”

“I’ve seen no evidence yet. It’s an open secret Deceivers are infiltrating both sides in force.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “General. We need to face the very real possibility both sides may throw everything they have at each other’s capital. What happens when there are no more sides? Only survivors?”

“It’s been a possibility for some time,” Kymeros said. “Perhaps a probability. But it isn’t an inevitability.”

“Nevertheless, what happens when it does become inevitable?” Thavros persisted. “Do we just go on? Or do we make things easier for our children? We could give them strength, or a greater willingness to work together. One solution seems Eastern, while the other Western. Yet East and West are failing. Is there a third option?”

“I’m a soldier, not a sociologist,” Kymeros reminded him. “Naturally, I would rule in favor of getting the job done. Of making the hard decisions quickly, without

hesitation.  I don’t wish to sound cruel, Thavros, but the world doesn’t favor the weak.  It never has.”

“We need a third option,” the Eastern scientist repeated.

“First things first.  Now that you know your techniques work with the crocodiles, can you use it on othermen?”

“We would use the viral vector to alter unfertilized eggs,” Thavros said.  “Then fertilize them in vitro and incubate them.”

## VI

Othermen eggs take about two months to hatch. However, the altered eggs took twice as long.  During the interim, the general had little to do but wait and converse with Thavros or the Pilot.  Drallos began spending more time with Allree, the female physician.

Kymeros suspected his brother of becoming attracted to her.

Kymeros felt a pang of loneliness and regret. Regret he'd never cultivated more relationships than he had. While fighting or planning battles, he had had no time to think about such things. But here, on this peaceful island, there was far more time to think. More time to wonder what if.

He sat on the dock, watching the waves roll over one another peacefully. It was hard to imagine the world at war here. The war he had dedicated his life to. Maybe he needed to get back. Back to doing, not to thinking.

"General," the Pilot's voice sounded. He looked over his shoulder and stood when he saw the robot approaching.

"Yes?"

“Transmission from Morgos.  He needs to speak to you.”

It would seem my wish is granted, he thought.  His superior wouldn’t risk a traceable communication unless it was something serious, indeed.  He followed the Pilot back to Thavros’ office.

The Eastern scientist had a visual call running. Even more unusual.  The two Westerners walked over so Morgos could get a clear view of them.

“Counselor, what are your orders?” Kymeros began, leaning on formality.  He had a bad feeling and tried to quell his fears with the familiar.

“General, our Deceivers report troubling activity in the East,” Morgos began.  “Production of disintegration bombs has been ramped up.  And not just the hand carried variety.  Larger bombs, ones designed to take out cities, are being built and loaded onto ships.”

“You fear an assault on our ports?” Kymeros asked. Such an action would have the potential to cripple the West’s infrastructure. But it would also require the East to throw most of their war machine into the effort. Such was the fortification of Western port cities. They had been built up to withstand offensives and improved upon for the entire war.

“Worse,” Morgos replied. “I fear they are aiming to attack the capital itself.”

“Impossible. Even if they were so brazen, how would they get past the ports?”

“There are rumors that they will create flyers to carry and rain down destruction on us.”

Just as the othermen hadn’t developed many land vehicles, they also had not pursued aviation, except in space travel. Even as an alternative to ships for crossing the oceans, it had been deemed impractical. It was also

more costly in terms of fuel and resources. Having the ability to fly made most transportation unnecessary, save in construction, ocean voyages, and war.

“They are tiring of fighting this war, as are we,” Morgos said. “The helmets have effectively taken the thought devices out of it, and the East is frustrated.”

“Perhaps now would be a time to propose a peace treaty,” the Pilot suggested.

It would be reasonable, Kymeros silently admitted. But it would never hold the East adequately accountable. Nor would it adequately punish them. So, in a way, he felt relieved when Morgos shook his head.

“Too many people on both sides demand justice,” the counselor said. “Vengeance, more like.”

He looked at Kymeros. Perhaps he was remembering the same past moment as the general.

“Do they suspect we got the helmets from Thavros?” Kymeros asked out loud.

“Possibly.  I need you to be extra vigilant. If you see or hear of an attack, you must warn me right away.  You are closer than any of our Deceivers in the field.”

“Absolutely,” Kymeros agreed.  “Will you need any of our scientists to return? To see if we can develop flying bomber craft?”

“I already have another team working as we speak. Besides, your charges are almost all biological researchers.”

“What about Drallos? He has technical training.”

“Yes, well…there is something else I need to share with you.  And pass on to your brother.  Pilot, can you record the next few minutes?”

“Yes, sir,” the Pilot answered.

Kymeros saw Morgos hitting a combination of buttons on his laptop. His image vanished, replaced with the blueprint of a bunker like structure. Then another blueprint showed an enormous engine. Finally, a diagram of the engine half buried in the ground flashed before their eyes.

“As you know, Eurobus is nearing Garobus again,” Morgos’ voice filtered over the images.

“Yes. What of it?” Kymeros asked.

“What you don’t know, is over the last century there has been another clandestine project. This one overseen by our government. The last five generations, we have fired rockets at the planetoid as it reaches its closest point to us. First, a bunker with robots to operate it landed on Eurobus. Then, the engine devices, one at equal distances from another, surround Eurobus’ equator.”

“Why? And why was it kept secret, sir?” Kymeros asked.

“Two reasons. First and foremost, we wanted to claim Eurobus for the West. Who knows what minerals could be mined from it? And for another reason, the engines are designed to change its orbit. It was hoped that, in time, its path around the sun could be moved enough to no longer drag asteroids in.”

Asteroid bombardment was always a risk whenever Eurobus appeared in the sky. It had been known for centuries the smaller planet passed through their solar system’s outer asteroid belt. And when it did, sometimes its gravity deflected large rocks in the direction of Garobus. Indeed, the Pilot had been built to fly an explosive laden rocket into one years ago.

Since then, there hadn’t been another asteroid that large. But there had been other bombardments.

Scientists constantly tried to come up with peaceful scenarios to destroy them. Not an easy task when the East accused them of building weapons every time the subject came up.

“Now, however, we’re looking at another possibility for the Eurobus base,” Morgos continued. “If the war reaches a critical battle, one where the capital itself is in danger, it could serve as a place to escape to.”

“Escape?” Thavros echoed. “But counselor, escape to where? Eurobus is barren and lifeless. There’s no food, water or air, save for whatever is in the bunker. Even if you took a rocket full of provisions and only your council members, Eurobus’ orbit takes two hundred years.”

“We would put ourselves in hibernation, if it came to that,” Morgos said. “Besides, it would be hoped we’d only have to be there for a few months before returning.

The dust would clear, so to speak, and we could maintain continuity of government."

"A distinct advantage if total war broke out over both our capitals," Kymeros said. "The East would be broken and we could pick up the pieces."

"You see why we need both secrecy and advance warning," Morgos said. "Have Drallos familiarize himself with the schematics. I would want all of you, as well as the council, able to make the trip in the event it becomes necessary. In the meantime, continue your experiments. After this war, we will need hardier offspring, whatever the outcome."

He swallowed. "Good luck to you, general."

"And to you, councilor," Kymeros answered.

## VII

Drallos took to his new assignment with dedication, but not enthusiasm. He and Allree had decided to

become mates.  Even though they knew the future was uncertain, they wanted to move forward as if peace would prevail after all.

The first altered eggs hatched.  The larva were larger and more temperamental than most.  If they reached adulthood, and were able to produce fertile offspring, then they would know they were on the right track.

Another change was proposed for the next set of genetic alterations.  Thavros planned on enhancing speed rather than strength or aggression.  Perhaps large legs instead of wings, and a metabolism dedicated solely to running and jumping.

He still continued to pursue the amygdala suppression.  This last option Kymeros liked the least.

“I acknowledge the potential of anger to be destructive,” he told Thavros one day. Both were in the genetics lab where the Pilot was typing commands into a computer showing a 3-D model of DNA. Eastern and Western scientists clustered around the robot’s workstation. He was pointing out the genes that controlled amygdala development and a possible gene for a suppressor protein.

“But you seem to want to remove the will. The will to fight and defend oneself. Self preservation is not always morally wrong. I think you Easterners forget that.”

“This is not to make future generations more controllable, general,” Thavros insisted. “The goal is to make our descendants more cooperative. Imagine a group of othermen with more patience, more willingness to overlook petty hurts. Imagine the potential of

cooperation coming freely.  Not forced as in the East or overshadowed by ambition, as in the West.”

“I am fine with physical enhancements,” Kymeros said.  “But affecting the mind is something else.”

“As a scientist, all possibilities must be considered,” Thavros said.  “I assure you, my real goal is to find a medium between our two peoples and their cultures.  A medium everyone can live with.”

Kymeros wasn’t sure he fully believed the Easterner. He didn’t think Thavros was lying to him, but the director still had a lifetime of unconscious bias for his own people.  The general would need to talk with the Westerners to make sure Western interests were still represented.

The next generation of young othermen was born. Or rather parallel generation.  These larva had the

longer legs and greater speed hoped for. They were the result of a targeted growth hormone. Not as powerful, or as general as regular hormone, but it achieved the desired results. Or so it appeared. It wouldn't be verified until they underwent their metamorphosis into adulthood.

## VIII

Kymeros walked the beach one day with Drallos and Allree. The latter two walked hand in hand. The general tried to make conversation, but felt like an intruder in their private moment.

"We need you to keep studying the Eurobus base so you can train others in its operation, Drallos," he was saying. "In the event any of us are ever deployed there."

"Yes, sir," Drallos said, absently, looking into his mate's eyes.

“Pay attention, Drallos,” Kymeros said irritably. “I’m happy for you, of course, but remember, we still have a job to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Drallos repeated. He paused. “Sir? Kymeros? Do you think we’ll have to evacuate so far away? I mean, it seems so farfetched. Besides, the disintegration bombs, while devastating, are still clean. Not like the more poisoning munitions of ages past.”

“Leave nothing to chance,” Kymeros warned.

He looked out over the sea. Squinting, he thought he made out a black dot or two. He glanced back at his companions and pointed.

“Is that a ship?” he asked.

They craned their necks and squinted.

“If it is, then they’re early,” Allree remarked. “We’d better go to Thavros and see.”

Thavros sent out a signal, hailing any nearby vessels. To his dismay, he received an answer. A request for a video call, no less.

“Allree, stand behind my chair,” the director ordered. “General, you and Drallos may stay, but please step out of the monitor’s line of sight.”

Kymeros nodded curtly, and complied. Drallos stood next to him, as the Eastern ship’s transmission came through.

“This is Thavros, director of Mariamne, speaking,” he began. “I read you.”

“Director. This is Traylos, general of the East.”

Kymeros’ ears perked up. Traylos was supreme commander of all the Eastern forces. He had seen him before, albeit from a distance, in more than one battle. He exchanged a look with his brother. If this was the person arriving, something big was happening.

“How can I help you, general?”

“You can help by preparing for my inspection,” Traylos replied. “I’m leading five warships there as we speak. We plan to attack the West, but will first stop there to rest and tour the facility.”

“Is there something you need from me?” Thavros asked, trying to sound casual.

“Reassurance. The West had our helmets much faster than we would have anticipated. While I trust you, director, I want to ensure no Western Deceivers are hiding in your midst.”

“All of my staff was cleared before they were ever sent here, general. You know that.”

“What about the refugees? Or other ships’ crews going to or from Mariamne? No, we need to be sure. Especially since we’re commencing this operation.”

“Yes, sir,” Thavros answered. “How soon till your arrival?”

“About twenty five minutes.”

“We’ll be ready. Director Thavros out.”

He shut off the transmission and looked at the military men. “What now?” he asked, and Kymeros could practically hear the panic in his voice.

“We need to leave immediately,” Kymeros said. “Summon all Westerners, and the Pilot, to our ship. We’ll be on the far side of the island before they get here.”

“Then what? What if they discover…”

“There’s only a few of us and we didn’t bring many personal items ashore by design,” Kymeros interrupted. He needed to keep Thavros on task. While the director had planned this unauthorized fraternization, a Deceiver he wasn’t.

“We’ll head back home, first sailing several miles out of our way south,” the general continued. “That way, we should evade detection.”

“Drallos?” Allree asked, nervously.

“It will be all right,” he assured her. He walked over, embraced her, and touched his forehead to hers. “Just stay calm. Reveal the research if you have to. But I promise you, I’ll be back.”

They embraced once more, and then Drallos followed Kymeros out. Thavros got on the intercom and told all the Westerners to drop everything, and head to the dock. It was the command of their general.

In about ten minutes, Kymeros and Drallos stood on the dock before the ship. The Pilot and all their fellows had joined them. Kymeros kept his speech quick and to the point.

“The East will be here in fifteen minutes,” he told them. “What’s worse, they are launching an attack as soon as they’re done here. We need to warn our people as quickly as possible.”

He flew on deck. They all followed him. Soon, the ship was rounding the island. It would make further preparations and then sail for home.

## IX

The ship sailed at top speed, making its way a few days ahead of the Eastern fleet. For one thing, the East had a delay in touring the labs, interviewing its personnel and scrutinizing the refugees. For another, the vessels were larger and slower. Undoubtedly loaded with bombs, Kymeros thought grimly.

They made their report to Morgos and the council.

“You’re certain the East will spare Thavros?” his mentor asked.

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t,” Kymeros said. “We didn’t leave anything incriminating.”

“Except the research itself,” Morgos pointed out.

“I don’t think so,” the Pilot said. “The purpose of Mariamne was to bioengineer stronger othermen. More likely, they will just keep a tighter rein on Thavros and his team.”

“That’s not comforting either,” another counselor said. “If the larva developed there mature into functional adults, how soon before we see squadrons of super soldiers on the battlefield?”

“If the war is still going after this attack,” another said. “Everything about this, from the size of the fleet to the target to the general’s testimony suggests it’s going to be one final push against us.”

“And we will meet it with our own pushback,” Morgos replied. “I move we place the city under martial

law.  Put General Kymeros in charge, deploy whatever our scientists have developed and get the evacuation craft ready.  Just in case.”

The vote was given and unanimously approved. Kymeros oversaw the local militias and law enforcers. Drallos, meanwhile, joined a group outfitting a rocket with provisions.  The spaceport was at the far end of the city, well behind their front lines.  However, even with the distance involved, the council could fly to the launch pad fairly quickly.

The transmissions began coming in from the coast. The ships began shooting projectile disintegration bombs form the dock into the city.  The East wasn’t wasting their troops on this initial assault.

The West had developed some flyers, but they were untried.  Some of them failed to get much elevation, and were taken out by the bombs as easily as the buildings.

However, others did make it airborne. Flying out to sea, they began raining down destruction on the enemy fleet. They took out two or three Eastern ships, and their associated armaments. Kymeros hoped one of them had contained General Traylos, but there was no way to tell.

Then, flying craft emerged from the surviving ships. Guns blazing, they cut the Western flyers to ribbons. Then the transmission went dark.

Kymeros flew to the gun stations one by one. He gave strict orders to fire without hesitation. Then he flew to the rocket. Drallos was waiting for him, along with a squad of guards.

“Drallos, prepare the rocket,” he ordered. “We need to be ready to lift off as soon as the line falls. If it should it come to that.”

They flew into the cockpit. There were no special suits; they were still encased in their armor. If they had

to travel all the way to Eurobus, they would largely have to rely on the automated base itself. And as for getting home, they would have to hope and pray there would still be a West to rescue them.

The Eastern flyers flew into view. With dismay and growing fear, they watched the guns fire, bringing down many of the enemy. But some did come through, and one hit the capital building. Striking it squarely in the midsection, it exploded, but also detonated a bomb. With nothing but empty space between top and bottom, there was nowhere for the top of the building to go but down. It smashed the bottom floors, causing a cloud of rubble to flood the surrounding streets.

The council and the Pilot had all been there. Drallos and his men all looked at Kymeros. The general had only one thought going through his mind.

The West had fallen.

The war was over, and they had lost. For a moment, even Kymeros felt despair wash over him.

But only a moment. His training then took over. Along with his resolve, born with the death of his parents. He would survive. He'd escape, regroup, and have his revenge.

"Start the ignition," Kymeros ordered Drallos. "We're falling back to Eurobus."

More reacting than thinking or feeling, Drallos hit the button. The othermen all felt slammed back in their seats. The rocket took off. Some of the Eastern flyers tried to intercept them, but they climbed into the sky.

X

Kymeros kept his view on the window ahead. He didn't see how many bombs rained down on his city. He would watch no more of his world burning. He would only keep focused ahead.

The sky grew less red and more black. The stars came out, brighter and crisper than he had ever seen them. One bright object dominated the view. Eurobus. Their destination and their hope.

He felt the pressure on his body gradually lesson. They had cleared Garobus and were entering the void of space itself. He hesitantly unfastened his seat belt.

Gently, Kymeros drifted upwards, out of his chair. He had heard of this before. Freefall is what the scientists called it. Neither Kymeros nor his men had trained as astronauts. So they hadn't prepared for life on a space ship.

"General?" Drallos asked hesitantly.

"Stay there for a moment," Kymeros said. "All of you."

He flailed with his arms, trying to move. Othermen didn't swim, but if they had, he would have, perhaps,

compared this moment to swimming.  He thought of the ‘jumping’ othermen being bred on Mariamne, and thought they might have an easier time of it.

He drifted up to the ceiling.  Looking down, Kymeros counted about a dozen or so warriors with him.  Behind them were empty seats.  They were meant for council members who hadn’t made it.  He thought of them, particularly Morgos.  All almost certainly dead.  He could only hope some remaining Western forces could retaliate.

The general ‘swam’ through the zero gravity over the chairs. Reaching the back door, he opened it and went into the next room.  Provisions of dried food and bottled water were stacked neatly on shelves lining either side of the room.  Another window showed the view behind.

He looked out and saw Garobus as he'd never seen it before. An immense circle filling up the view, he could see the coast of the Western nation. The ocean filed the rest of the view, and a sliver of land on the edge of the horizon would be the East. Mariamne was too small to be seen, even at this relatively small distance. Wispy clouds drifted lazily over land and water. The war and what was happening couldn't be made out. The general thought he saw flashes of light on one part of the globe, but couldn't be sure.

He went back to the cockpit where his men were. "Who among you have trained for this?" he asked.

"We have sir," one said. The two next to him raised their hands as well. "I am Lonros. This is Natros and Karos."

"What can you tell us about what to expect?"

“It will take about five days to reach Eurobus,” Lonros said. “We will lose part of the rocket when the fuel tank runs out. Then, only the module will remain.”

“What is that?” the general asked. He hadn’t bothered much with the space program, feeling it was irrelevant to the war. If only he’d known Morgos’ backup plan sooner.

“The part we now inhabit,” the astronaut explained. “Once we reach Eurobus, we will need to land at the base manually and contact the robots stationed there. They will set up the airlock and position the module for return.”

“Then the module itself has enough fuel? Enough to return to Garobus?”

The three astronauts looked nervously at one another. Kymeros got a bad feeling before they

answered.  The other soldiers also regarded them with unease.

“Sir…the module is only designed to make a relatively short flight on its own,” Lonros explained.  “It was to rendezvous with another rocket that would take us back to Garobus.”

“But…the spaceport was destroyed,” Drallos pointed out timidly.

“Soldier…” Kymeros began.

“Are we going to be marooned, general?” another asked.

“Even with food, we can’t live there forever,” a third spoke up.  “We’ll die slowly, rather than quickly like we would have on the surface.”

“Silence!” Kymeros barked.  They were on the edge of panic.  He knew if they had a chance of survival, they would have to maintain discipline.

“Remember your training!  You are not civilians. You are Western warriors.  And Western warriors never panic.  They persevere.  They prevail!”

No one else spoke up.  They didn’t have to.  The fear and doubt in their eyes remained obvious.

“I admit, things don’t look good,” Kymeros continued.  “But take stock of our remaining advantages. First and foremost, we still live.  As do legions of our comrades back home.  They will continue to fight.

“Second, while the East has won a victory, they have also exhausted their own war machine.  Even if the West cannot launch a large counterattack, the war is effectively over.  Third, we have provisions, and a clear, safe destination.  Finally, said destination is equipped with hibernation pods.

“In the event of delay in getting another rocket, we can put ourselves under until one is available.”

He turned back to the astronauts. “What else do we need to do in the meantime?”

“You and the others should eat, sir,” Lonros said. “Not too much, however. You should also take turns moving to get used to weightlessness.”

“All right.” Kymeros divided them into three groups. One would sleep, one would do light exercises and one would monitor the controls. While the ship’s course was laid in, and the astronauts could pilot manually, the general wanted everyone familiar with as much of it as possible. Besides, it helped to pass the time.

## XI

He barely slept the first ‘night’ in his strapped in chair. The next, he managed a few hours out of sheer exhaustion. On the third ‘day,’ the astronauts had everyone strap back in.

“The main fuel tank should be nearing the end of its supply,” they told the others. “Then, it will automatically detach. Brace yourselves.”

They felt a jolt. Then, the ship drifted, pushed along by its own inertia. After a moment, they felt another lurch and the module picked up speed once more.

“It should be all right to move now,” Lonros told Kymeros.

The general nodded and unfastened his belt. Drallos followed, and the brothers floated to the storeroom behind the cockpit. In the back window, they could see the hollow tube forming the rocket’s main body floating away. Behind, Garobus had gotten somewhat smaller. They could now see a decent amount of black void around the disk of their world. In the next couple days, it would get smaller and smaller.

Drallos put his head on the window, and sighed. “I left her,” he said softly.

“Allree?” Kymeros asked.

His brother nodded, and hung his head. Othermen don’t cry; they lack the necessary glands. A transparent film covers their eyes to keep them moist, while a second opaque membrane shuts out light when they sleep.

But they do feel sorrow and anguish.

“We will return,” Kymeros insisted. “Believe that.”

“We…she…was thinking she’d lay eggs soon,” Drallos continued.

“Then you will return a father.”

“I should have stayed, danger notwithstanding,” he continued. “I should have…”

“Drallos,” his brother and superior interrupted. “If we had stayed, we would have been executed. Even if we managed to fight our way out, we couldn’t evacuate

the whole of Mariamne. The East would have killed all of them, too."

"I could have, at least, taken her," Drallos argued. "But I thought we'd draw them away and crush the invasion. Instead, look at us. Hurtling through space, while who knows what is happening to our world. They might have killed her and Thavros anyway, just because they were suspicious."

It was possible, although Kymeros didn't want to confirm it and drive him further into despair.

"Allree and Thavros were dedicated to their work," Kymeros said at last. "They wouldn't have wanted to leave anyway. They had a job to do, as do we. Never forget who you are, Drallos. A soldier of the West. That's who Allree fell in love with."

"Yes, general."

“General!” he heard Lonros’ voice from the cockpit. “Come quickly!”

They returned to the front. Kymeros was about to ask what was happening, but he didn’t have to. The question answered itself with a glance out the front window.

The othermen saw lights. Three bright lights flashing the full spectrum of color and moving in and out of one another. He had never seen it before, but knew what it was. They all did.

At different times and places, the lights had appeared to othermen. Those history later called prophets, mystics or visionaries had described encountering the phenomenon. Always the same; three lights in one appeared and offered what seemed to be guidance. After communing with the lights, the othermen in question became forever changed. They

became wiser, more thoughtful, creating new works of art or writing great literature or inventing something their world needed. Even the Pilot had encountered them. The last appearance of the lights had engulfed the robot's ship, granting him sentience.

The lights drifted directly in front of them. Their brightness increased, and Kymeros felt a presence. Something like the thought device, and yet, different. For while this presence felt stronger, it also made no attempt to force itself on them. Moreover, the communication wasn't in words. It went deeper; it was felt, rather than simply heard.

It was a clear message. Turn back. Return to Garobus and live. Or go on to Erebus and die.

"Can you pilot around it?" Kymeros shouted to Lonros.

“I will have to switch to manual,” he replied. “But…do we really want to go forward, general?”

“What would you suggest?” Kymeros retorted. “You said there isn’t enough fuel to return home.”

“There wouldn’t be if we went on to Eurobus,” the astronaut corrected. He looked at his instruments. “If we turn back now, we would have just enough fuel to return to Garobus and probably make a survivable landing.”

“Probably?” the general echoed.

Lonros looked sheepish. “The safest landing would be in the ocean. Under normal circumstances, we’d contact the capital and have them dispatch a ship. As it is, I could try to land close enough to an island we could fly to. Maybe even Mariamne.”

Drallos looked up. Then he looked hopefully at Kymeros. But the general shook his head.

“Not good enough.  I’m not taking a risk just because of…”

He trailed off and pointed ahead.  The othermen beheld the lights and considered.  The lights had been harbingers of great change.  While the changes had ultimately been for good, they had never been easy.

Moreover, being faced with the lights, Kymeros realized something else.  He would have to trust them here and now.  For they all felt the lights were a conscious being.

Some othermen had dismissed them as a natural, random force.  Kymeros couldn’t, having experienced them firsthand.  The lights were alive, perhaps more so than they themselves were.

But all the knowledge of them, both first and secondhand, didn’t tell them whether they should trust the lights.  The lights, for their part, neither pleaded nor

argued.  It gave the directives and waited to see if the othermen would follow.

Kymeros, however, found he couldn’t trust a request for such risky action. To be sure, either option carried danger.  But on Eurobus, there were no Easterners and enough supplies to give them all time to regroup and make new plans.

“Steer around it,” Kymeros ordered.  “We’re taking the safer option.  Our first option.  Move on to Eurobus.”

Drallos looked on his brother with dismay.  As did some of the other warriors.  But none of them dared argue against their commanding officer.  Kymeros felt simultaneous gratitude and relief for this.

Lonros hit a few buttons on the console in front of his seat.  A steering wheel folded out of the metal parts making up the control panel.  Now, he steered the ship to the left, but still away from the planet.

They had watched Eurobus getting closer the last two days. As they approached, the rogue planet no longer appeared as a bright star. Now it presented itself to them as a dull brown rock, too large to be an asteroid, but far smaller than Garobus.

The lights remained in the same place as the module moved around and continued traveling. The general went back to observe it through the rear window. He wanted to see whether they would be followed or not.

When he made it to the back, he saw no lights. Only the slowly receding view of Garobus. In the distance, he saw the still drifting fuel tank, but that was all.

Perplexed, he returned to the cockpit. “The lights have vanished,” he told his men.

“Yes. We know,” Drallos said.

And they did.

A somber feeling settled over the crew. A feeling that suggested a choice had been made and a path had been taken. A path they would travel on alone.

## XII

The last couple days were marked with heavier sleeping, lighter eating and minimal conversation. Kymeros had steeled himself against any second guessing, and his men didn't question him. There was no purpose in it; what was done was done. Besides, they were soldiers.

Eurobus now dominated the view. They could already see a metal bunker on the side they were approaching. As they came in closer, they could see a brightly lit tube like structure branching off of the main body.

“That’s the airlock where we will need to land,” Lonros told the others.

He pressed a button and Kymeros saw jets shooting out of their front, temporarily obstructing their view. The general realized they were meant to slow the module down.

“In order to slow further, we will need to make an orbit,” Lonros said.

Kymeros nodded and they felt a slight pressure as Eurobus’ gravity well captured them. The astronaut cut the forward thrust and instead operated the counter jets in the front. They settled into an orbit and their communicator crackled to life.

“Eurobus base to unknown ship. Please identify yourselves.”

Kymeros jumped slightly, for the voice was identical to the Pilot’s. Just as he pondered how that could

possibly be, he remembered it was simply the standard robot voice. While the Pilot was the only sentient one, other robots served in various functions throughout the West. In particular, here in space. The robots had solar batteries to stay powered up, and could maintain each other. Otherwise, they needed nothing else.

"Lonros, Western astronaut, security code 042-080," the head astronaut replied. He waved over the other two. Three security codes were needed for the robots to let them in. Otherwise, the base would remain locked and no assistance would be forthcoming.

"Natros, Western astronaut, security code 031-211," the second one said.

"Karos, Western astronaut, security code 050-571," the last one finished.

“Acknowledged.  Please complete one standard orbit and one suborbital flight around Eurobus while preparations are made.”

“Acknowledged, Eurobus base.  Over and out.”

Lonros turned to Kymeros.  “The orbit’s supposed to give us more time to reduce speed,” he told the general. “Since Eurobus has no atmosphere, there also isn’t the friction to slow us down.  We’ll have to do it ourselves.”

An orbit took only half an hour at their current speed.  All of them got to see all the surface of Eurobus. It was pockmarked with scars from countless other collisions with meteors over the ages.  The only distinctive features were the large bunker and four smaller artificial structures.  Spaced around the equator, Kymeros recognized them as the engines Morgos had told them about.

“So they have been completed,” Kymeros remarked. “I wasn’t entirely sure.”

“This project has been underway for a century,” Karos pointed out.

“But the war has taken the last few decades,” Natros added.

“Have they been used?” Kymeros asked. “Can they really move the entire planet?”

“The robots assembled them after their pieces were assembled here,” Lonros said. “They have apparently succeeded. But that is the extent of their programming. Maintenance. Any further action we need to initiate ourselves or order directly.”

Lonros dropped into suborbital height. The view didn’t change much, except for showing they were closer. The engines, like the base, were solar powered, and were to be operated remotely. The good news was

they looked not only complete, but in good condition from this distance. Maybe they could be used to some advantage?

“Everyone make sure you’re secure,” Lonros said. “This landing is rough under the best of circumstances.”

They all adjusted their straps. Outside their ship, large ski like landing gear deployed. The base had been built on a relatively smooth part of Eurobus, but it would still be bumpy.

The module decreased its elevation. Soon, it was no higher than an otherman flying back home. On the dark horizon, they saw the base approaching, surrounded by dark brown rocky terrain.

Touchdown jolted them violently. Kymeros heard the landing skis scrape and the module bounced up and down several feet. Eurobus had no mountains and had been carved into fairly level terrain over the course of

eons, but he still felt as though he were ascending to the highest peak and crashing to the greatest depth. His insides all rattled and he felt ill. Silently, he thanked fate none of them had eaten for hours.

The jolting did at least provide the needed friction to slow them down. Kymeros feared the ship would snap under the pressure. But the module was state of the art, and constructed from the strongest materials available. It held together.

The base now seemed to run forward beside them, and stop as the craft did. His ear holes popping, stomach lurching and vision swimming still didn't prevent Kymeros from thinking.

*We made it. We still live.*

Then he lost consciousness.

## XIII

When he came to, he felt Drallos shaking him gently.

“General, we are here,” his brother said.

He blinked and opened his eyes. The astronauts were rousing the others. Kymeros at least had the satisfaction of not being the only one who had blacked out.

Drallos helped him to his feet. He felt sore from straining against the seat belts, but wasn’t bruised. The others seemed to be in similar shape.

Kymeros was about to ask what happened next when the door to the outside opened. A robot, physically identical to the Pilot, stepped in.

“Welcome to Eurobus base,” it said. “The airlock is secure. Please follow me.”

It turned and walked out before even getting a reply. Kymeros led his men out of their module. A grey tube had been connected to the ship, and at the end of about a dozen feet, there was a light.

The othermen stepped into a brightly lit room. Mostly transparent plastic, it provided a view of the harsh outside environment. Kymeros looked at their ship. While one of the skis was slightly bent, it appeared intact.

The others looked out the windows, beholding Eurobus. The sky was completely dark, but the stars shone brightly. Garobus hung off to the side, now no larger than the sun appeared to be from home.

At the far end was another metal door. The robot walked over and stood before it. Transmitting a message to the other robots beyond, it stood still for about a minute. Just when the general was going to ask it about the delay, the door opened.

Two more robots stepped out. Ignoring the othermen, they walked into the airlock. The first robot addressed them.

“The ship will now be repositioned for relaunch,” it told them in its flat mechanical voice. So like the Pilot and yet so unlike, Kymeros thought.

Briefly, he wondered what had become of him. Most likely destroyed with the capital building. Another loss the East would have to pay for.

“Please enter the base’s control center,” their mechanical host continued.

They did, and the door shut behind them. From a camera showing the observation room, Kymeros watched the robots unhitch the end of the tube from the module. Stepping out into the cold, airless environment, they activated the rockets in their feet. They picked up the module and set it on its side. As the robots positioned it, Kymeros hoped it would be useable again.

He turned and looked at the main room of the base. It was well lit and lined with computer terminals. About

twenty or so robots manned the area.  Kymeros addressed the first robot again.

“Are any communications devices available?” he asked.

“There is one thought device.”

“Show me.”

The robot led him into the next room.  He saw a thought device.  Kymeros still hated them, though he recognized the necessity of them for communication.

“But wait,” the general said. “We can’t possibly still be in range of any receivers.”

“This thought device is enhanced with increased power,” the robot told him.  “It should still be in range of Garobus.  However, we are drifting out of maximum range.”

The remaining othermen came in.  “General, try to contact Mariamne,” Drallos said.

Kymeros let the lapse in discipline slide. Circumstances were extraordinary, to say the least. Besides, it was the most likely place they would get a response.

*Thavros*? He thought, trusting the device to send his mental impulses to Garobus. *Thavros, can you hear me*?

He felt his mind wandering, if not drifting. It reached out to their home, and Kymeros mentally strained to pick up another's thought. He felt flashes of emotion. Fear, anger, uncertainty, sadness. But nothing concrete.

Then, in a very faint mental whisper, he heard a response.

*General Kymeros?*

*Yes*, he thought back, excitedly. *I'm here.*

*Where?*

*We managed to make it to Eurobus. Please, how is the island?*

*Intact…they left…groups breeding…Allree…eggs…*

Then, he could hear no more.

*Thavros? Thavros!*

Desperately, he reached out with his thoughts. But he could not find the scientist again, nor anyone else. He turned off the thought device and looked at the robot.

“What happened?”

“Eurobus continues on its orbit away from Garobus,” it answered. “We have moved out of range.”

“What did you find general?” Drallos asked. “Anything?”

“I very briefly made contact with Thavros,” the general said, for all their benefit. “It would seem the island wasn’t attacked. The work there continues, for what it’s now worth.”

“So many have died,” Lonros said. “The rest of our forces will need all the help they can get.”

“Maybe the island refugees are the most fortunate,” Kymeros said. “They can continue their lives in peace. Once the East and West return to relative calm, maybe…”

“General?” Drallos interrupted. “Forgive me, please. But…did you hear anything of Allree?”

Kymeros hesitated for the smallest moment. “The distance was too great,” he told him. “I can’t get any further news.”

“But…wait a moment,” Drallos said, getting an idea. He looked at the robot. “Do the engines work? The ones meant to move Eurobus out of its orbit?”

“All are fully functional,” it informed them. “Solar batteries for each are fully charged.”

“Then we’re saved,” Drallos said. He looked at his confused comrades. “Well, don’t you see? We can push Eurobus back along its orbital path. If we get close enough, we can then take off in the module and use its remaining fuel to get back to Mariamne.”

“Yes,” Kymeros said, thoughtfully. “Relying on neither the lights nor the time it would take for Eurobus to orbit back in the vicinity of home.”

“Negative. Action not recommended,” the robot said.

The othermen had begun chattering happily amongst themselves. For one bright moment, it looked like their wild escape plan had worked after all. The robot’s protest made their giddiness melt away.

“Explain,” Kymeros ordered.

“Module’s fuel too low.  In order for the distance to be sufficiently small, the gravity of Eurobus would have to overlap the gravity well of Garobus.”

“So what?”

“Such an action, termed ‘total eclipse,’ would make Eurobus’ gravity pull at the atmosphere and crust of Garobus.  Even if a collision could be averted, the intensity of gravity would induce storms, earthquakes and darkness.  Surface devastation would result in countless lives lost, and possibly irreversible damage.”

“What if we pushed back just enough to be in communication range?” Drallos insisted.  “We could maintain our position and wait for a new rocket to be built.”

“Is that feasible?” Kymeros asked the robot.

“Engines designed for short bursts to alter orbit,” the robot answered.  “Sustained discharge would drain

solar cells, which take time to recharge.  In time to recharge, Eurobus would drift out of its position, potentially closer to Garobus."

*So it would be little better than approaching in the first place*, Kymeros thought.  He looked around at his men.  Fortunately, even Drallos maintained composure, although no doubt despaired inside…

"Robot, I understand this base has hibernation tubes?" he asked.

"Correct."

"Show us those, along with the rest of the base.  And have our provisions unloaded from the module.  We'll decide what else to do later."

The general's orders were carried out.  When added to the food and water already on base, it was determined several months' worth of food was available for all of

them.  Moreover, in this near sterile environment, there was little to no danger of spoilage.

In addition to the storage room, there was a barracks with nearly fifty hibernation tubes.  Said tubes could, of course, also double as normal beds.  A spare parts room contained equipment for both the robots maintenance and the engines.

There was no armory.  And the only weapon was a single disintegration bomb.  While not as large as the ones that destroyed their capital, it would be sufficient to destroy the base. A final defense against the unlikely possibility of the East ever reaching here.  The robots hadn’t been programmed for any type of aggression. They only locked down when faced with intrusion.  The remoteness of Eurobus itself provided most of the defense.

It also meant exile for them all.

Kymeros ordered all the men to the main computer room. Around them, machines that looked like the Pilot manned the instruments. Ruefully, Kymeros imagined they 'piloted' this miniature world, although the truth wasn't so simple.

"After reviewing everything, I think our only option is to put ourselves in hibernation," he told them.

He watched their reactions. All maintained composure, but all had various degrees of doubt and despair. He would have to remain firm.

He looked at the chief robot. "But there is one thing we can still do. Robot, have you calculated the orbit change? To keep Eurobus from passing near the solar system's asteroid belt? That was your main objective."

"Multiple scenarios have been calculated and simulated," it told them. "Best option is as follows. In twenty Garoban years, Eurobus will be in a position

where, if thrust is applied at an angle, the orbit will be pushed inward."

"Meaning?"

"Orbit of Eurobus will be shortened from two to one hundred Garoban years. Asteroid belt will be bypassed. Proximity to Garobus will shorten, but well out of range of total eclipse. Thrust will need to be applied at multiple critical points to ensure stability of new orbit."

"Will you require our supervision to carry out your objective?"

"No. All can be accomplished automatically."

"Then I order you to carry out your calculations when we reach that point. In the meantime, I order you to place us in hibernation until we receive a transmission from Garobus."

He looked at his fellow organics. “We can at least ensure no more asteroids bombard our home. No doubt, it will help their recovery.”

“But general, how will anyone know to send a transmission out here?” Natros protested. “Even if there are othermen who could?”

“The capital was destroyed, not all our cities,” Kymeros argued back. “There are other factories, other research depots, and other bases. We’ve fallen, but we still live. They still live back home.”

“But this project was classified. You yourself knew nothing of it prior to Morgos.”

“The council did inform other bases,” Lonros offered. “Immediately prior to the attack.”

“Thavros and his group know we’re here, too,” the general reminded them.

He looked around them and narrowed his eyes. “Is this action a long shot? Yes. But what other hope do we have? If we give up, we will die out here. If we have, no, if we make hope, we will live. It’s as simple as that.”

Slowly, they nodded. He was right and they knew it. Their survival, their one chance, lay in looking to the future. Even if said future was years away. Maybe, just maybe, by the time they were revived, their world would have sufficiently healed and rescue could come.

Minutes later, one by one, the crawled into an empty hibernation tube. Their vital functions would be slowed to nearly zero, but they would still live. For as long as it took.

Kymeros was last to go under. The last thing he saw was the robot standing over him, activating the pod’s life suspending mechanism. The last thing he thought was about the war. How it had ended, in ruin and exile.

*I will avenge you, Morgos*, he thought. *I will avenge all the West. I am one individual the East will never suppress. I will return, and I will make my presence felt throughout the world. Even if I do have to wait a century.*

## XIV

Kymeros became vaguely aware of existing. He was floating in darkness, at first unaware of who he was or where he was. Light slowly crept back into his world, changing the black to gray. Then, the one gray mass separated out into blurry shapes.

“General Kymeros?” a flat emotionless voice asked. “Can you hear me?”

The blurs sharpened and he saw the face of a robot. Conscious thought swam to the surface of his perception and he remembered. He, General Kymeros, had led a squadron of Western soldiers in escaping their capital’s

destruction.  They had fled into space, to the planet Eurobus.

He groaned and shook his head to clear it.  He raised an arm, which felt heavy, despite Eurobus having similar gravity to Garobus. While smaller, the planetoid was also far denser.  The heaviness was simply due to stiffness.

“Move slowly, general,” the robot said.  “Stretch. Allow time for your blood to flow freely.”

He did, and allowed himself several minutes to collect his strength and thoughts.

“Have you received a transmission from Garobus?” he guessed, remembering his final instructions.  “Is that why you revived me?”

“Correct,” the robot answered.

It volunteered no further information, so Kymeros had to directly question it.

“What is our position?”

“We are approaching Garobus. The thought device only now picked up transmission. Eurobus has rounded the sun, and will be at its closest to Garobus within six months.”

Kymeros remembered that, while irregular, the orbit of Eurobus was still elliptical. Thus, half of its year covered less distance than the half further away from the sun. He also realized, given that position, they had been unconscious for almost one Euroban year. Or one or two Garoban centuries, depending on whether the alteration of orbit had been successful.

“Robot, did you manage to alter the orbit? To avoid the asteroid belt?”

“Alteration of orbit commenced twenty Garoban years after you went into hibernation. Per your orders.”

“Successful?”

“Yes.  Eurobus has not intersected the asteroid belt since implementation.  Nor have any asteroids bombarded Garobus in the interim.”

*Something to be thankful for*, he thought.  Still, they had been under so long, everyone they knew would be dead.  Othermen were lucky to live three quarters of a century in the best of circumstances.  He felt a pang, but he had it easier than most of the others.  Drallos was still with him, and Morgos had been killed anyway.  He had had a few other comrades he’d been fond of, but no one any closer.

Drallos himself would take things far worse.  He’d left a mate and possibly eggs. He didn’t know the others as well, but feared several of them would have similar stories.

“Have you awakened anyone else yet?” he asked the still waiting robot.

“No, you were revived first.  What are your orders?”

“Don’t revive the others just yet,” he decided.  “Help me up.  I need to assess the situation.”

The robot complied, and helped Kymeros to his feet. The general struggled and the robot steadied him.  His limbs protested the movement after being idle for so long.

“General, it is recommended you take nourishment after leaving hibernation.”

He nodded, not about to argue.  His throat was dry, both from disuse and for the sterile air of the compound. His voice sounded crackly in his own ears, and he felt surprise he had gotten as many words out as he had.

The robot had its arm over his shoulder, helping him.  Kymeros hobbled to the provision storage room.  A table and chairs were in the center, so he sat down and

tried to clear his head. The robot brought him a food pack and bottle of water.

Kymeros took a few hesitant bites and a drink. While both tasted stale, they were clearly preserved. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the room where he'd been sleeping. The others were still there, sealed up in their transparent coffins, waiting to be recalled to life. He finished his food, gave it a few minutes to settle, and stood back up.

The robot continued to help him, but Kymeros felt his strength slowly returning. The tubes had performed their task more than adequately. Now, the general stood in the main computer room, looking at the robots.

They all continued to manage their stations, looking no different from how they did when he had been put under. One of them was looking at a monitor showing Garobus. Cameras mounted outside the base continued

to transmit pictures of the sky.  Kymeros walked over to have a look at his home world.

When he studied it, he frowned.  While the image was clear, it somehow didn't look right.  He had a hard time picking out the Western continent, despite the hemisphere having relatively few clouds. Nor did the land masses look like the East.  Indeed, its shape, reminded him of the ocean separating the warring nations more than anything.

"Robot, something's wrong," he said.

"Transmission is accurate and fully functional," a seated robot replied, not looking up.

"Then why does Garobus look different?"

"The continents have shifted during your hibernation," the first robot informed him.

"What?" It didn't make sense to him.  First, the robots assured him their orbit had been successfully

shifted.  So no great natural disaster should have happened.  As for gradual movement, he remembered learning in his youth about the crust of Garobus shifting over time.  But continental drift was supposed to take…

“Robot, you have been monitoring Garobus the entire time I’ve been asleep, correct?” Kymeros asked.

“Correct,” the seated robot confirmed.

“Show me an image of Garobus when we left.”

The robot complied and the image appearing on the screen was the same as what he remembered.  A bad feeling began welling up in the general’s thoughts.

“Show me the process of change between our hibernation’s beginning and now,” he ordered.  “Display the passage of time and speed up the footage to only take a few minutes.”

He watched as the ocean drained away from its former location.  It flooded the southern part of the

Western continent, starting from where the disintegration bombs had destroyed the capital and coastal port. The East, meanwhile, drifted farther away. Soon, the ocean where Mariamne had been was now dry land.

And the time that had elapsed was far more than a century or two. Kymeros looked at the display, dumbfounded. Nothing of his world could possibly be left now. Indeed, the sea now covered his former country. It hadn't happened overnight, but still had taken far less time than their scientists had thought. What had happened?

His world, his people. Gone? But, no, while ages had passed, Garobus was clearly not a dead world. He still saw the telltale green color signifying plant life. And, a transmission had been sent.

“You did awaken me once you received the transmission from Garobus?” he asked.

“Correct.”

“You only just received a transmission?” Kymeros persisted. “None before now?”

“Correct,” the robot at his side repeated.

“What kind of transmission? Could you trace it?”

The robot at the terminal hit several buttons on his console. Data scrolled across the screen rapidly. While the general couldn’t follow it, he knew the machine was carefully analyzing the data.

“Transmission is from a thought device,” the robot said. “Origin of the signal is the city of Mariamne.”

So much time had passed. And yet, someone down there not only had a thought device, but knew how to use it. It had to be an otherman; the devices weren’t automated.

“I need to answer,” Kymeros told them. The robots didn’t answer in the positive or negative. He went to the thought device and activated it. Grateful that this time, Eurobus was moving closer to rather than away from Garobus, he transmitted a message.

*This is General Kymeros, transmitting from Eurobus base. Please acknowledge.*

He waited a moment. No answer was forthcoming. He tried again.

*I repeat, this is Kymeros, general of the West, to Mariamne. Please respond.*

He felt a response then, but still ‘heard’ no words. A presence could be felt, another otherman, confused, searching, reaching out.

Kymeros repeated his message once more and waited for a response.

*Hello?* He ‘heard’ finally. *Is anyone out there?*

The language of thought had been discovered to be universal. Even if two othermen spoke differently, they could still communicate, or manipulate, using the thought device. Indeed, Kymeros got the impression this otherman probably spoke neither Eastern nor Western.

*Yes,* he thought back. *I am general Kymeros. Identify yourself.*

A pause. *Ranyos,* his mind registered. *I am Ranyos. You are from Mariamne, Ranyos?*

*I am originally of the Society,* Ranyos mentally answered. *Now I am an Outlier. I am currently in Mariamne, however.*

*Are you of the East or the West?* Kymeros 'asked'. *The terms you use mean nothing to me.*

*I don't know 'East' or 'West',* Ranyos 'replied.' He paused. *Are you really on Eurobus? Are…are you an otherman? Or something else?*

*I am an otherman and I am on Eurobus.*

*How can that be? How did you get there? How is it you have a thought device? Are you from Before?*

*Before what?*

*Before the Thought War. The Pilot has alluded to space travel Before. But how could you be alive after so long?*

Kymeros collected his thoughts. It had been a very long time. He reminded himself the East and the West no longer existed. The Society and Outliers must be the current nations. And they called his conflict the Thought War. Ruefully, he considered the name appropriate.

*We have been in hibernation,* Kymeros explained to this Ranyos. *We left instructions to be awakened when we received a transmission from Garobus.*

He felt Ranyos turning the new information over in his mind. Then Kymeros realized something else Ranyos

had just told him. He mentioned the Pilot. The sentient robot who had been with him for over a year before the capital had been destroyed.

He had survived? For this long? True, as a robot, he wouldn't age like an organic being. But still, to survive this long seemed extraordinary. Especially since Kymeros thought he'd have been destroyed when the Council's tower collapsed. Clearly, the robot had avoided being crushed. But what had he been up to in the ages since?

*You mentioned the Pilot. Who is he?*

Ranyos' answer confirmed what Kymeros had deduced. *A sentient robot from Before. He has ancient knowledge and has advised the queens of the Society since its beginning. He has a room in the hive where he has artifacts from Before. Including a thought device. It's how I knew how to use this one.*

Kymeros paused, considering. *Let us share our thoughts fully. Then we will understand one another better. Tell me everything about your life.*

Ranyos complied and showed Kymeros the life he had lived. In the Society, one fertile female, one queen, ruled with the Pilot as an advisor. They kept a few scraps of technology, but otherwise, the world had been primitive since the time Before.

Kymeros saw Ranyos grow restless and frustrated with the other male drones and sterile female workers. They had indeed been altered mentally to be more submissive. Thavros, whatever else he'd done, had been successful there.

Ranyos had fallen in with the Outliers, the outcasts who were what Kymeros would call normal. But to the Society, they were an aberration. Ranyos had tried to change things, first by diplomacy, then by deception.

He was a Deceiver, Kymeros realized. The general felt surprise the position still existed. It was apparently more ceremonial now, but Ranyos had put it to use in trying to instigate a coup. He had lost his wings as punishment. The general could feel his anger and betrayal.

Then, Kymeros sensed something even stranger from Ranyos' mind. A group of alien beings had visited Garobus during Ranyos' coup. The general caught an image of them. Ugly, mammalian primates who wore the skins of other animals. Apparently far more modest than othermen. Kymeros didn't blame them.

They were ugly, but apparently smart. They had harnessed the fundamental forces of the universe and generated wormholes. From a faraway planet they came, wielding weapons and instruments different from anything they had ever had. Calling themselves

‘humans’, they claimed to be peaceful, but were apparently defensive, and easily goaded into aggression.

Kymeros then shared his thoughts with Ranyos. About how he had served in the Thought War for his entire adult life. About Mariamne and Thavros. About their escape and desperate gamble.

*What will you do now, general?* Ranyos asked after the memory sharing. *Can you return to Garobus?*

*I don’t know.* Kymeros felt a pang of uncertainty and frustration. They were close, but still just a little too far. The rocket had insufficient fuel. And the robots had strongly advised against positioning Eurobus too close to Garobus. He didn’t want to destroy his home while trying to return to it.

*I will need to revive my comrades and discuss things. Perhaps a solution will present itself. You are certain there are no rockets? No spacecraft?*

*None. The Society knows nothing of such things. Or of you. The tribe in Mariamne had a legend of otherman leaving for space, but no one else did.*

So, their last transmission to Thavros had been remembered after all. He felt a flash of anger that nothing was ever done about it. Of course, Mariamne had had no space travel. And in the aftermath, the survivors had been more worried about preserving themselves.

Kymeros supposed he understood. After the first orbit around the sun, a century had already passed. The othermen probably figured the escapees were dead by then. Certainly, no one had ever intended them to be frozen for so long.

## XV

Kymeros and the robots revived the others. At first, the general kept the truth about how long they'd been

under to himself.  He merely ordered them to eat, stretch and walk about the base.

Inevitably, however, he had to tell them the truth of things.

“Then…our world is gone,” Karos said.  They were all seated at the table, eating.  Some were angry, some saddened, and all were shocked.

“A form of it remains,” Kymeros said.  “This Society seems derivative of the East.  Probably due to Thavros. While Ranyos tells me they pay lip service to individuality, they still have to stay within established roles.  They must obey their queen unquestioningly. They aren’t allowed to invent or innovate.”

“So, what then?” Lonros asked.  “We would most likely not be welcome there.  What are we supposed to do?  Scrape out a living among the outcasts, or Outliers, as this Ranyos calls them?”

“You said he’s a Deceiver, though,” Karos pointed out. “Are we sure he’s telling the truth? Maybe the East still exists, and they’re trying to lure us. You said yourself the Society seemed almost the same.”

“I was never fond of Deceivers,” Kymeros admitted. “Even when using their intel. However, I sensed honesty in Ranyos through the thought device. The memories felt true. Besides, the robots have monitored Garobus the entire time. Life has survived, even thrived. But there are no longer any advanced cities.”

Drallos shook his head, and looked saddened.

“Drallos, is there a problem?” Kymeros asked, harsher than he intended. He knew what was the matter, of course, but had no words of comfort to give.

“Allree,” his brother said quietly. An otherman next to him put a hand on his shoulder in sympathy. Kymeros momentarily chided himself for not doing the same. But

he felt he had to stay strong.  And strength didn't lend itself to softness.

"We need to pull ourselves together," Kymeros said.

"It's easier for you to say, general," Karos said.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Kymeros asked, not liking the astronaut's tone.

"You left nothing behind.  Or nobody.  The rest of us, though, had family or friends.  Maybe we should have stayed behind."

"And give up?" Kymeros demanded.  "Surrender? No.  Besides, it's a moot point now.  I'll not have you wallow in self pity.  Not even you, Drallos."

Drallos nodded, but remained silent.  Karos, however, wasn't finished.

"And why are you are the final say? You're not the only one here, general."

"I'm the highest ranking here."

“Of a dead army.  Does it matter anymore?  Even after all this time?”

“Especially after all this time!” Kymeros raised his voice.  “You say there’s no more West?  *We* are the West. We will bring the West back.”

“How? We’re still stuck here,” Lonros reminded them.

“Maybe we should just go back to sleep,” Natros growled scornfully.  “Hope things are better in a few centuries. That worked out so well before.”

Kymeros walked over and cuffed the astronaut. “You’re out of line!  I saved your lives.  You will show respect and obedience!  I say I’m in command and we’re still the West.”

He looked around, daring them to argue further. None of them did, even though Natros and a few others

looked like they wanted to. At least, for the moment, however, he saw no further rebellion.

“All of you tour the base,” he ordered. “Look for any possible solutions. Anything that may prove useful.”

“How long do we have to try, general?” Lonros asked.

“I’ll have final say, but I’m not making specific plans until I have a clearer picture,” Kymeros said.

“A week? A month?” Lonros continued. “Our provisions are limited. Should we consider hibernating?”

“I said, I’m not making any decisions yet,” Kymeros repeated. “I’ll talk to Ranyos while you look over the base. Dismissed.”

Slowly, they stood and walked in different directions, alone or in pairs. Drallos walked towards the observation room and airlock. Kymeros looked at Lonros and pointed at him. He silently motioned for the

astronaut to follow his brother. While he didn't think Drallos would do anything desperate or foolish, he didn't want to take chances. Lonros understood, nodded, and followed him.

## XVI

Kymeros talked to Ranyos telepathically once more. The Deceiver and Outlier repeated that no, there was nothing resembling space travel left. As for the strange aliens, the humans, they hadn't traveled to Garobus by rocket either. Kymeros supposed he shouldn't be too surprised. After all, the distance between stars was too great. Conventional travel simply wouldn't work. But the beings from another world had somehow travelled the distance.

Unfortunately, the othermen hadn't been able to recreate it. They didn't have plans or a working model. Even the Pilot had only made an interference generator

to prevent teleportation into the hive.  Ranyos himself had seen the schematics but wasn't an engineer.  He wouldn't be able to reproduce them.

Or could he?

Kymeros walked into the observation room.  Eurobus hadn't changed, and the module remained as they had left it.  Lonros and Drallos came out of the airlock tube and met him.

"The module is intact, general," the astronaut said. "Even if we can't take off, the circuits and raw materials might be useful."

"I'll keep it in mind," he replied.  "Drallos.  I want you to get on the thought device with Ranyos.  See if you can look further into his mind for any part of the schematics he saw."

"He said he didn't remember," Drallos reminded him.

“Not consciously, perhaps. But maybe, just maybe, his unconscious mind still has the details.”

Drallos thought. “It is possible,” he admitted. “When I trained with thought devices, the working theory was the unconscious mind forgot nothing. Indeed, part of a Deceiver’s debriefing was to be probed after returning from a mission.”

“Yes. Do the same thing with this Deceiver now.”

Drallos nodded, and seemed to perk up. Kymeros realized a task would help keep him busy. It would distract from grieving and mourning his long dead mate. Indeed, they all probably needed such distractions.

It took multiple sessions, but Drallos managed to reproduce the schematics from Ranyos’ memories. The next step was then to make a survey of all the electronic and mechanical parts in storage. While they had a lot,

some of the more delicate circuits had to be cannibalized from one of the robots and the module's computer.

Surprisingly, Kymeros and Drallos got little or no pushback from the others. They had accepted the module being an unlikely means of getting them home. Moreover, this new method of transportation seemed to be the most promising means of escape. Indeed, the very idea of it fascinated them. As did the notion of other beings besides othermen.

"What can it mean?" Lonros wondered. "Is life just a natural byproduct of the universe? Wherever conditions are right?"

He and Drallos were discussing it during the construction of the gateway. After the schematics had been recorded and printed out, they had begun building two of their own. They knew from Ranyos the gates

could only go one way.  So they'd need one on both Eurobus and Garobus to track back and forth.

"We still can't account for how life can just spontaneously rise from nonlife," Drallos answered. "Unless something or someone directed it."

"The lights?" Kymeros put in.  He wasn't working on the parts themselves. Instead, he had been conducting his own sessions with Ranyos to learn the modern otherman language.  Now, however, he was taking a break.

"We all felt it," Drallos said.  "Don't you remember, sir? The feeling of getting a message? To turn back?"

"The lights seemed to be moving towards Garobus," Kymeros said.  "Yes, of course I remember.  But that doesn't necessarily mean we were being 'herded.' I think the lights are an energy source which sparks life. Naturally, it would be drawn to where life already was.

And if it sparks life, perhaps it also stimulates the electrical activity of the brain. But it's not necessarily alive itself."

"Would the lights then be around the human's planet, too?" Lonros asked. "We never observed it anywhere near any other planet except Garobus. So, even if it did start life here, it didn't there."

"Who knows?" Kymeros said. "Probably it wasn't our lights. Maybe just a similar phenomenon. We never observed the lights elsewhere. But we also never observed the human's planet."

"I believe it did," Drallos said. "I still hold it has a mind and a will."

The question wasn't likely to be resolved anytime soon. But the more practical matter, the portals, proceeded steadily. It took a couple of weeks, but they finally completed two working models.

Drallos activated the first one. It showed the observation room outside the computer room. Then, he had two of the soldiers, Phobos and Deimos, carry the second portal to the airlock.

“When you get there, activate the gateway,” Kymeros ordered them.

“Yes, sir,” Phobos answered.

He and his companion took it out and activated it. They left the door open, so they could hear each other. A moment later, Deimos shouted back into the computer room.

“We see the stations, general. And all of you.”

“Good so far,” Kymeros said. He looked at one of the robots. “You there, walk into this portal.”

“Yes, general,” it answered. It had no fear or uneasiness, because it had no sentience. Kymeros felt fairly confident both in Ranyos’ memories and his

brother’s engineering.  Still, if anything went wrong, then he’d much rather a machine paid the price than one of his comrades.

The machine walked into the portal.  On the monitor, they saw the robot in the airlock.  Deimos and Phobos jumped and shouted excitedly.

“General, it worked!” Deimos shouted from the open door.  “The robot just appeared by the portal.”

“He didn’t walk out of it,” Phobos added.  “He just materialized.”

“They’re one way only,” Kymeros shouted back. “Robot, can you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” the robot answered.  It was harder to hear, because it didn’t shout.

“Walk back into the portal in front of you.  I want to see what happens then.”

The robot complied, and Kymeros blinked. Suddenly, the robot was standing by the portal in front of him. No lights flashed or sound was heard. It was simply there.

“Robot, are you still intact?”Kymeros asked. “Can you detect any problems?”

“I am fully functional,” it told them.

A cheer went up.

“We’re saved!” Karos said. “General, sir, forgive our doubts. Your plan has worked! We live and we have a new world to return to.”

“Hold on,” Kymeros warned. While pleased it was successful and faith in him was restored, he still didn’t want to be too hasty. “We still need to ensure othermen can travel without problems.”

“If you want one of us to volunteer,” Lonros began.

“No, that won’t be necessary.  Not yet. Drallos, I’m going to contact Ranyos once more.  When I do, adjust the gate to hone in on him.  I will have our Deceiver test our gates himself.”

## XVII

Phobos and Deimos lugged the second gateway back into the computer room.  He contacted Ranyos, and told him what they wanted.  Fortunately, he agreed, and they began.

Drallos pulled up a view of an old computer workshop.  It looked vaguely familiar, but they weren’t sure.  What they were sure of, however, was the sight of a male otherman standing in the middle of the room.

*Ranyos*? Kymeros asked mentally.

*Yes, it is I, came the response*.

He looked no different from them. In all the time they had been away, there had apparently been no ‘evolution.’ A blow against the materialists, if any had been left. Any changes made to the othermen had been artificial.

*Still*, Kymeros thought, *without arrogance or false humility, aren’t we already suited to rule Garobus? Whether shaped by nature or something else,* that *fact remains*.

“Put the second gate through,” Kymeros ordered his people. To Ranyos, he thought, *activate the portal when it comes through. Then we should be able to talk.*

Ranyos did so. After having his unconscious memories awakened by Drallos, he felt far more comfortable operating it than he would have. After

setting it upright, he adjusted the controls and looked back at them with wonder.

“I see you, general,” he said. “Amazing.”

“It is,” Kymeros agreed, speaking in the modern otherman language. “Tell us where you are now.”

Ranyos explained he was in the computer lab of Mariamne. He showed them spare parts, a couple of working thought devices, and a few oddly shaped helmets. The same ones designed by Thavros’ team, so long ago.

“Come through the portal, Ranyos,” Kymeros ordered. “Let us meet face to face.”

Ranyos did, and found himself in a computer chamber. Looking around in wonder, he saw robots resembling the Pilot monitoring equipment greater than he had ever seen before. When he had been

exiled from the Society, he had sworn to never again show deference to anyone.

He inclined his head to Kymeros and his fellows now.

“Welcome to Eurobus base,” the general said formally.

“I never imagined such things could be,” Ranyos answered. He looked around the room wide eyed. The others regarded him with curiosity and or amusement at his reaction. Then they noted his scarred back and lack of wings.

“What happened to him?” Lonros asked.

“What? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Right now, I’m the only one who speaks your modern language,” Kymeros said. “They want to know how you were injured.”

Ranyos' face darkened. "The queen, Arachne, did this to me. As punishment for my rebellion."

"We have interest in returning home," Kymeros told him. "However, we feel like we couldn't be part of the Society. It seems too much like the East."

"The nation you fought in the past, yes," Ranyos answered, remembering the shared memories. "Will you then help us, the Outliers, in overthrowing Arachne?"

"Tell me what forces you have at your command," Kymeros ordered.

"You don't know?"

"I got a general outline of your life, as you did of mine," Kymeros explained. "But I can't possibly retain every bit of information your mind ever stored. I concentrated on learning your language. My brother, there…"

He indicated Drallos.

“He focused on the portal construction. I myself don’t fully understand them.”

“There are several dozen or so Outliers from Ariadne’s tribe,” Ranyos told him. “A few hundred among the Mariamne tribe. It is led by J-Par. There are also an unknown number of Scavengers in the dry seabed.”

“What of weapons?”

“None to speak of. The Mariamne tribe are simple farmers and live in the outermost ruins. They were wary of the inner city, probably because memories gave way to superstitions. Anyway, my group settled in the center, and we discovered the labs. A few thought devices and helmets are there. Nothing else.”

“We only have one disintegration bomb,” the general said. “Enough to destroy the base. My soldiers also have our sidearms.”

Kymeros thought for a moment. “And the Society?”

“They number in the millions,” Ranyos said. “However, the population is kept at a fairly constant size. As for weapons, they have a cache of disintegration bombs, not unlimited. They have one thought device, the Pilot, and an interference field to prevent teleportation into the hive.”

He scowled. “That was all the Pilot could build with what few spare parts he had. I watched him while in prison. Before my…sentence.”

“Nothing else? No factories or mines?”

“None.”

“The humans,” Kymeros mused. “According to you, they have armaments.”

“Yes. But they are cautious. I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think they’ve been to Garobus in about four years.”

“Can they return?”

“I don’t see why not. But again, my view of them is they can be violent, but don’t wish to be unless they have to.”

“So you don’t think they’ve delayed their return to build up their forces?”

Ranyos thought of the humans he had met. Ellis Harlan, Aaron Adams, and even human soldiers like Keisha Thomas.

“The particular humans I met weren’t conquerors. One of them told me a little of their history. They have warred and conquered one

another in their past, but have tried to curtail worldwide warfare in the last century. After they had their own series of conflicts that killed millions."

"But they still have weapons, so they didn't become completely pacifistic."

"No," Ranyos agreed. "They can and will still fight, if given a reason."

"What if they felt the Society was a threat?" Kymeros asked. "Would they join us then?"

"Possibly. It depends on how immanent the danger."

Ranyos looked at the general. "What would you suggest?"

"You are a Deceiver," Kymeros said. "During our war, the Deceivers went undercover to learn secrets and sow discord in the enemy ranks. What if they saw an otherman on their own world?"

“It would certainly make them take notice.”

Kymeros looked over at his brother, and switched to ancient otherman. “Drallos, do you know how to find the human’s planet?”

“If I shared thoughts with Ranyos again, we could possibly find it.”

Kymeros reverted to modern otherman. “Drallos thinks he can pinpoint Earth with your help,” he said. “Will you assist him?”

Ranyos agreed and Drallos had him stand in front of the portal’s controls. The ancient technician activated the thought device and concentrated on the Outlier. Ranyos felt the technician’s mind sifting through his own. It wasn’t pleasant, and he fought the urge to resist. He recognized the humans’ help would be invaluable, and they had to work together if they were to find Earth.

Ranyos felt his hands begin to move to the portal controls. Drallos had tapped into his unconscious memory, and was directing him to scan space for their hopeful destination. He saw stars appear and heard the soldiers chattering in their language. Keeping his attention on the controls, he tried to think of Earth itself. He hadn't been there very long, but he remembered Mooresville Installation.

"Look," Kymeros ordered after a moment. "Is that it?"

Ranyos looked up. The stars had vanished, and the portal showed a room of some kind. Dirty and cluttered with debris, he saw a window in the far wall's top part. Orange yellow light streamed down. He saw no humans, or anything alive for that matter.

"I've never seen this place before," Ranyos said.

“So it could be Earth, or it could be something else,” Kymeros said.

He looked over at his comrades. “Here’s what we’ll do. I want more gateways built. We’ll set up an open area for them in the observation room. A link between here and Garobus will be maintained. In the meantime, this place will have a return gate sent through before we send anyone or anything else. If there’s a problem, anyone going through can immediately return.”

He turned to Ranyos. “You. Does anyone else know about your contacting us?”

“Yes.” When Ranyos saw Kymeros’ disappointment, he added. “It was too amazing to keep to myself. J-Par’s people look on you as legendary. As for Arachne, we’re far enough away

from the Society's hive that she has no way of knowing yet."

"I see. Very well, Ranyos. Return to Garobus. Gather as many salvageable parts as you can and bring them here."

"Yes, general Kymeros," Ranyos paused. "And thank you. Thank you for returning."

Kymeros nodded and waved him away. Drallos adjusted the portal back to Garobus, and Ranyos walked back home. A moment later, they saw him reappearing in the computer lab and walking off.

"Well?" the general asked his fellows.

"I don't understand, general," Lonros said after a moment. "Why don't we go home now? Ranyos got here and back without any problems. Why the delay?"

“First of all, because we know it works, we have no more worries,” Kymeros began. Lonros was about to keep talking when the general interrupted him.

“Second, while we’re returning home, it’s not the home we left. We need to be discreet and avoid detection for as long as possible. Third, we will have another battle, a new war, to fight when we do. So we need to be ready. We need to gather as many resources as possible. Even from the aliens.”

## XVIII

After building three more gates, they set up their original one in the observation room. It remained tuned into Mariamne. Since Ranyos had the second gate in the computer lab, Kymeros ordered one of the three new ones to be tuned into the unknown room. If it turned out be Earth, he

could send one of the remaining gates as a return to Eurobus. The fifth and final would serve as a spare.

Kymeros also had their one disintegration bomb transferred to the same area.

“We no longer have to worry about needing to destroy the entire base,” he explained. “If we have any trouble at all, it will come to us through this room. If we need to blow up an approaching army or destroy a return gate, then…”

He trailed off and pointed at the bomb. Thankfully, his men were following him unquestioningly now. Even the astronauts, who hadn’t served under him as long, were now in accord.

They still wanted to set foot on their home world once more. Kymeros decided to compromise. He spoke with Ranyos, and had the Deceiver make

sure the lab and upper levels were emptied out. Then, one night, he had them take turns sneaking into the lab, going to the top deck to look out on their world, and then return. They had to make sure they weren't seen. They also only went down two at a time; some of them still had to stay and watch the base. Even after their victory was won, the general figured they'd keep the base open. Who knew how they may find it useful?

Kymeros himself accompanied Drallos on his turn. They found themselves standing over the city of Mariamne on a cool, clear night. The stars were out and it was surreal to see Eurobus in the sky after being on it for so long. Granted, most of the time was in hibernation. Still, they had been awake for several weeks now, and felt both imprisoned and squeezed by the confinement.

Drallos looked out over the dry seabed. Once it had been ocean. He looked over the city. Once, it had been much smaller and the island had been green and cultivated. Now, however, the city had taken up the entire area of the original island. Now it was a barren hill, although in the dark they could see crops at the base. As the ocean had receded, the farming had followed.

All of this only seemed to depress the technician. He had returned home only to realize firsthand he didn't want merely to return to a place. He wanted to return to a time. Their time. But that could never be.

"So, were home," Drallos said. "Yet, we'll never be home at the same time."

"We will make a new home," Kymeros promised him. "We must."

# XIX

They sent a robot through the portal to the room. It walked around for a minute, circling the parameter of the small space. Then Kymeros had his people put a gateway through so the robot could return.

“The atmosphere, temperature, and pressure are comparable to Eurobus and Garobus,” the robot told them when it reappeared.

“Then we can send someone there,” Kymeros said. “Ranyos, if he feels confident enough.”

“There is an issue, sir,” Drallos responded. “What are we going to do about communication? We can only talk to someone at the other end of the portal if he’s right in front of it. And we can only see so far out. No farther than if we were standing there in one place. How can we stay in touch?”

“What about the thought device?” Kymeros asked.

“It has limited range, as you know. Even our powerful model only goes down to the surface of Garobus when we’re close enough.  There’s no question of trying to communicate with someone in another solar system.”

“True.  But the entire point of the gateways is to eliminate distance.  To make going miles, even light years, shrink down to mere footsteps. What if we tried to transmit a thought device signal through the gate?”

“Perhaps.  Let’s have Ranyos bring some of the thought devices from Mariamne.  Perhaps there will be a way to merge the technology.”

Ranyos stepped through the portal and was surprised to find himself back in the observation room. He looked out the windows at the surface of Eurobus, the module, and Garobus itself. Still distant, but increasing in size, Kymeros took it as a measure of time before they retook their home.

“We have set up a second pair of portals. They go to and from the new place,” Kymeros said. “We also sent a robot through. Apparently, its air is safe enough for othermen.”

“Have any humans been seen?” Ranyos asked.

“We’ve seen no living things,” Kymeros said. “We believe the place to be an abandoned building of some kind. Perhaps a home, or warehouse.”

He looked directly at the Deceiver. “We want you to go through it.”

Ranyos hesitated. While not wanting to go alone, he felt like it was also a test. He needed to prove his loyalty to the general by an act of obedience.

He reflected. They had already determined it would be safe enough from a natural standpoint. Moreover, they would be watching him. And the return gate was set up to enable a quick escape, if the need arose.

He took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped through. Kymeros was pleased with the Deceiver for not arguing or questioning him. Some of his own men couldn’t boast as much. Indeed, he heard them murmuring their surprised approval behind him.

Ranyos looked around, and turned back to the general, watching from faraway Eurobus.

“It’s definitely a lower level.  An old stairway’s right off to the side.  Probably leading to a ground level, since the windows here are near the ceiling.”

He stepped out of view.  They heard a yell meant to get someone’s attention.  Then Ranyos came back to them.

“I didn’t hear anyone.  Let me go up the stairs.”

“Proceed.” Kymeros answered.

For about fifteen minutes, they neither heard nor saw anything. The othermen looked at each other nervously.  Some wondered if they should go in after the brave Deceiver.  But they waited for orders from their general. Kymeros, for his part, waited with folded arms.

Then, finally, they heard the sound of footsteps. Ranyos returned and waved to them.  Before they

could say anything, he had used the portal at his end to return to them.

“I have good news, general,” he said with a smile. “The building I was in is abandoned. So it will provide a possible cover for any covert operations we wish to do.”

“You believe it is Earth after all?” Kymeros asked.

“I peeked out a window,” Ranyos continued. “I tried to stay out of sight for several minutes and watch. There’s a paved road of some kind immediately outside. It’s used by motorized wheeled vehicles. I happened to catch a few passing by. General, they’re being driven by humans. It is Earth after all.”

“Excellent.  All of you, good work.” The general included Drallos and the others in this.  Then, he began thinking practically once again.

“Yet, it’s not Mooresville? Not the place you were before?”

“No.  I’m not sure where on Earth it is.  I will have to scout the area, so I should reverse cocoon. If I can find any clothing, it would help, too. Especially if I travel by night.”

“Yes.  I understand the humans look like our larval forms?”

“An adult human looks like an otherman before final molting.”

*Only hairier and smellier*, Kymeros thought. *Like cattle.*  While he hadn’t seen one firsthand yet, he had read Ranyos’ memories.

“Go home and reverse cocoon,” Kymeros told Ranyos. “Then return here. Also, I want you to bring a couple of thought devices. We wish to incorporate them into the gateway’s design. If we can send thought waves through the gate, then we can stay in communication much more easily.”

“Yes sir.”

XX

Ranyos returned later, having told his comrades on Garobus that he’d be away. He expected to spend some time scouting Earth. He did remember the thought devices. Drallos put the first on in the frame of their Earth gate.

“I have it tuned into the main device in the computer room, general,” he reported in modern otherman. Kymeros had had his men learn the modern language via his own thoughts. “Once the

other is incorporated in the Earth machine, it will form a mental chain spanning worlds."

"We hope," Kymeros said.

"Will I need to do it myself or will one of you accompany me?" Ranyos asked.

"I'll go, general," Drallos volunteered. "It doesn't make sense sending anyone else."

Ranyos and Drallos went through the portal. Drallos looked around at their dark, musty environment. He didn't envy Ranyos having to stay in such a place. Still, it was another planet, and he was one of the very few othermen who had set foot on it. He took the liberty of flying to the window and peering out before starting work. He saw a yellow sun, trees and the road Ranyos had mentioned. Then, he landed and installed the final thought device.

“It’s done, general,” Drallos told Kymeros through the gate. The two othermen waited a moment in the dimly lit basement. Drallos noticed a crawl space under the stairs.

“Ranyos, it may be wise to conceal the portal,” he suggested. “Eventually you’re going to come into contact with humans.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I will need to present myself as helpless if I’m going to get them to take me in.”

*Ranyos? Drallos? Are you there?*

They both picked up on Kymeros’ thoughts. It worked. The thought was channeled across the light years just as they had been. Drallos felt a flash of pride for the ingenious improvement of the humans’ technology.

*Yes general,* Ranyos thought back.

*We are here,* Drallos thought.

*Excellent. Drallos, return home. Ranyos, find out where you are. If you're in or near Mooresville, you can appeal to your earlier acquaintances for their help.*

*Yes, general. As I was telling Drallos, if they see I'm alone and can't harm them, I should have an easier time. They will readily believe the Society are their enemies. They truly are enemies for us.*

"Let's move the gateway under the stairs," Drallos said. "Then, you can find some way to cover it."

They did, and Drallos returned home. Over the next several days, they waited for Ranyos' communications. He had found some clothes and ventured out. He discovered he hadn't arrived in Mooresville. Instead, he had appeared in a close by community called Lagoda.

Initially, Ranyos was going to try and venture out further. However, the further away he got from the abandoned house, the harder it was for him to communicate telepathically. Apparently, the thought devices' range remained comparable to other Garobus devices. Except for the farther origin of the initial signal.

*I will have to try and lure more humans here*, Ranyos told Kymeros. *If they get glimpses of me, an otherman, lurking here, then eventually Mooresville will have to take notice.*

*Very well, Ranyos. Be careful, but do what you see fit. We'll need the humans and their weapons.*

## XXI

Finally, the humans 'captured' Ranyos and took him back to Mooresville. It took him out of their

range, but Kymeros had to trust the Deceiver knew what he was doing. Meanwhile, he had his men investigate remotely.

Drallos, Phobos and Deimos probed the area around their portal in Lagoda. Gently, so as not to arouse suspicion, they tried to learn about the humans there as much as they could. In particular, they monitored the pub where Ranyos had tried to get information.

Phobos touched the mind of the human who apparently ran the place. One Andre Jackson. His thoughts were strange, filled with memories of things the otherman didn't fully understand. However, he did sense frustration with his life, and the feeling of being played for a fool.

"What is Ranyos doing?" Kymeros said nearby. He was pacing, a sign of impatience if ever there was one. "I expected a report by now."

“Maybe the humans aren’t as easy to convince as he thought they would be,” Drallos offered.

“He assured us they were as much an enemy to the Society as the Outliers were.”

“Things take time, sir.”

“We have some time, but not infinite,” Kymeros argued back. “Eurobus will be close to Garobus in a couple of months now. If we’re going to return, it needs to be soon.”

“The gateway shouldn’t be affected by distance,” Lonros said from the computer stations. He was watching the robots’ activity. “If it can get from Garobus to Earth, then even if Eurobus heads back out to the outer system, we’re in no danger.”

“I know, astronaut,” Kymeros said. “But I admit, I’ve been growing as impatient as all of you were before we found Ranyos. We’ve been here too long.”

“Maybe we could hurry things along, general,” Phobos spoke up.

“What do you mean?” the general asked.

“Deimos and I are monitoring the people in Lagoda. They’re still suspicious. They’re also angry, frustrated people.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“They would be easy enough to manipulate. We could control them, like factions during the war controlled one another.”

Kymeros paused. That was true. They knew humans were just as susceptible. Perhaps more, if they were angry and frustrated as it was. Still, he hated to do it.

In his long military career, Kymeros had only used thought device attacks with great reluctance. He had never forgotten his first exposure to them. Ever since,

the tactic seemed dishonorable, even dirty. He had always tried to simply fight. Honest, straightforward, and may the best army conquer.

"If we do, Phobos, don't we simply start the Thought War again?" Kymeros asked. He was asking himself as much as his comrade. He remembered Phobos had been more bloodthirsty than average. He wasn't just good at killing, he enjoyed it. Knowing that about Phobos, and probably some of his other soldiers, should he suppress it? Or allow them to vent?

"I don't think so, sir," Phobos said. "We'd just be using it the way it was originally intended. For clandestine operations, not a real campaign. Besides, humans aren't othermen. We don't have to use them against othermen again."

"No, not even the Society," Drallos agreed.

Kymeros nodded slowly. “Very well. See if you can stir them up.”

Phobos sent a thought to the human, Andre Jackson.

*What are you going to do about it?*

*What?*

Andre responded to the voice in his head, with a mental question of his own. However, as far as Phobos could tell, he didn’t suspect an outside force was manipulating him.

*What are you going to do about it?* Phobos repeated mentally. *They're laughing at you, Andre. They think they've pulled a fine joke on you. Everyone's going to think you're a fraud. No, wait. Everyone's going to think you're stupid.*

He felt the human’s anger welling up. He turned to Kymeros with a smile. “It’s working. What are your orders, general?”

“Send them to the humans’ installation.  Then get up, and let me contact Ranyos.”

Phobos obeyed, and Kymeros sat down after he was finished.  The general activated the thought device, tuned it to his own brain, and reached out mentally across the interstellar distances to find his agent.

## XXII

*Ranyos.*

*Yes?*

Ranyos answered, but made the mistake of doing so verbally.  Kymeros probed Ranyos’ mind and learned the Deceiver was at Mooresville, albeit under guard.  He had alerted the guard, and now had to make up the excuse of ‘thinking out loud.’ Ironically, the statement wasn’t entirely false.

Kymeros waited a minute, and tried again. *A Deceiver should be more careful.*

*Forgive me, Kymeros*, Ranyos answered by thinking. *I was caught off guard. It won't happen again.*

*What is happening with the humans?* Kymeros 'asked'.

*They have taken me in, and are considering sending me home,* Ranyos 'said'. *I'm not sure if they believe me about the Society yet. As of now, I see no evidence they are planning on returning to Garobus. Some defenses have been added here, but the humans remain cautious.*

“He’s there, in the human’s midst,” Kymeros said out loud, for the benefit of his men. “But you were right, Drallos. They are hesitant. It looks like they do indeed need persuasion.”

Phobos smiled. He felt he had done well. Perhaps a reward would be forthcoming after their battles had been won. Kymeros turned his attention back to Ranyos.

*I thought they might need further incentive. No matter. I have been working on the very thing. Fear not, Ranyos. Soon you will once again see Garobus and Ariadne.*

Ranyos finally managed to get the humans to return to Garobus. He sent a quick thought message to Kymeros, telling him he was heading to Mariamne with one Aaron Adams. There were other humans as well, setting up camp where they had before.

“Let’s adjust the gateway,” Kymeros instructed his brother. “I doubt anything noteworthy will happen at Mariamne before Ranyos gets there. See if you can pull up the human’s campsite.”

“Yes, sir.”

Drallos adjusted the controls. Their robots had detected activity on the planet, and the checked the general area. Sure enough, a crater came into view, with several bipedal creatures exercising and firing weapons into the air.

So these were the humans. They were as ugly as they had been in the mind’s eye of Ranyos. At first, their activity seemed nonsensical, but Kymeros realized they were attempting to create a diversion. The Society queen had the artificial spy eyes used before and during the Thought War. Some of the models had been powerful enough to see into space. While the queen’s evidently weren’t that strong, she should be able to detect any movement in Erebus.

Indeed, it seemed to pay off. In the sky, the othermen saw another robot approaching. Like their

servants in appearance, but not in mind or soul.  It was the Pilot himself.  Amazing; he had survived as long as they, only awake the whole time.

"I'm Colonel Dressler, United States Army," one of them said, standing at attention. White haired and slender, he was clearly the leader.  One commander recognized another.

"Are you the one called the Pilot?"

"I am," the robot said in a masculine, synthetic voice.  "While I have encountered humans before, you and your party are new to me.  Why have you come back here, to that which you call Somnus, but we call Garobus?"

"For four of our years, we have had no contact with you," Dressler told the Pilot.  "Then, a few weeks ago, an otherman appeared near our base."

"How can that be so?" the Pilot asked.

"Can you confirm no one could have come from the Society?"

"No, Colonel Dressler.  The Society has sent no one. We want nothing to do with you.  The only other factions are the Outliers and Scavengers.  Both groups are even more primitive than we.  I assure you, they don't have anything approaching your abilities, even if they did have the desire."

“So far, it seems to be working,” Drallos told his brother.  “The deception, I mean.”

“We’ll see,” Kymeros said.  “They have had to be prodded every step of the way to get this far.  We might have to encourage them some more before they do any real fighting.”

They turned their attention back to the humans and Pilot.

"Now, that's very interesting," Dressler replied, with just the faintest trace of irony. "We managed to capture the otherman. It turns out he claims to know you. He calls himself Ranyos."

"Ranyos?! Colonel, Ranyos is a fugitive. An exile, for treason."

"We know. He told us. And he showed how you burned off his wings."

"Yes. That's correct," the Pilot confirmed. "Ranyos. But I don't understand. How could he have possibly travelled to Earth?"

"He claims he snuck back into the Society and found a gate there."

"But we have no gateway," the Pilot protested. "As for Ranyos, we haven't even seen him since his punishment."

"Yet, he sits in a prison back on Earth."

The Pilot didn’t answer.

“You know we have him, because we know what you did to him," Dressler pressed.

"I tell you, we have no gateway."

"And by your own admission, the only other groups on this planet couldn't possibly have one either. I know you took the information on portal construction the last time we met. If our roles were reversed, wouldn't you think we developed gates of our own?"

"I do understand their workings," the Pilot confessed. "But we have no technology except for a few artifacts from Before. There are no factories anymore, no programmers, and no engineers."

"There's you. You could custom make such a device, even without infrastructure."

"But not without materials."

"I'm not inclined to simply take your word," Dressler said. "I don't suppose you would be willing to show us your hive? Provide proof of what you say?"

"I doubt the queen would allow it. Especially given your armaments. I don't understand how Ranyos ended up with you. But I also don't understand your show of hostility. An armed squadron? War games? Why this show of force over one renegade otherman?"

"Because there's more than one renegade," Dressler said, his eyes narrowing. "We were attacked by a group of people who came from the town Ranyos appeared in. They were under the control of a thought device. We know because the interference we ran stopped the attack. Just like last time."

"Impossible! How could that possibly be true?" the Pilot protested.

"You tell me," Dressler answered, folding his arms.

"I must return to Arachne," the Pilot said. "None of this makes any sense. I tell you, Colonel Dressler, no such activity was authorized by, much less carried out, by the Society."

"We'll wait for now," Dressler agreed. "Confer with your superiors and return with your answer.  We're not eager to start a fight. But know we have the capability to do so if answers aren't given and steps conducive to peace taken."

The Pilot nodded, and flew away without another word.

## XXIII

The othermen waited for Ranyos to reach his destination and the Pilot to return with his answer.  For the moment, they had little to do except keep an eye on both Erebus and, through their probing of the Lagodans,

Earth. Kymeros had Drallos, Phobos and Deimos take alternating shifts to do all of this. The astronauts he kept with the robots in the computer room. They would be needed to keep watch over the main instruments and the engines, should the robots have any problems. The other soldiers he had exercise and keep up their strength as best they could in the cramped conditions.

Drallos probed the humans. One had joined the Lagodans after the initial assault on Mooresville. A human had run interference and disrupted their thought device. Rather than relinquish control or risk damaging the brains of their human puppets, they had induced unconsciousness in them all.

This human, Arthur Takamori, had also been rendered unconscious by the last signal. Since he had been the one running the interference, Drallos considered it a fortunate accident. Now, at least, he had

another subject for study besides the largely ignorant and unpleasant Lagodans.

As it turned out, Arthur was far more intelligent than them. He, like Drallos, had an interest in electronics. It was he who, along with the 'Harlan' Ranyos mentioned, had first gotten the portals to Somnus working.

Drallos probed deeper, accessing the technical memories of the human. He saw more details of the schematics, shortcuts he could have taken had he known. Ranyos' memories had only been second hand; the Deceiver was no scientist. He wished he had been able to access this human's memory when they were building their own portals. No matter; they had still managed anyway. Maybe after this was over, Drallos could improve on both designs.

"No…no…don't…."

Arthur had spoken. Next to him, another human heard and tried to soothe him. Drallos realized that, while unconscious, Arthur still had some awareness. The human knew, felt, that someone was invading his mind. He didn't like it anymore than any otherman would. The technician felt a flash of sympathy for him. He was only a civilian, not a soldier. Much less an Eastern sympathizer. Nor was he any friend of the Society.

Still, this was war, and war inevitably produced collateral damage and civilian casualties. On the other hand, Drallos saw no need to make Arthur one. If he continued probing, the human might start resisting and make Drallos' job more difficult. So, he decided to stop for now. He'd try again later and see what he could learn.

## XXIV

Kymeros went to the thought device. He had done his best to be patient with their Deceiver. But he still felt restless and wanted to keep things moving along. The general reached out mentally to Garobus, specifically to Mariamne. He hoped Ranyos would be close enough to hear. He couldn't make an overly wide sweeping signal; that would be too faint and dispersed to be mentally heard.

The humans had returned to Lagoda and discovered their gateway / thought device. The general didn't know what to do about that, so for the moment, he simply let the situation be. They hadn't tried to use it yet. Nor had they tampered with it to the point of damaging it. He tried to reassure himself that they didn't know how a thought device was built, so hopefully didn't know a thought device was implanted in the gateway.

He had listened to the humans talking. They did recognize the differences between his design and theirs. While suspicious, they hadn't come to any conclusions yet. So he had held off on awakening the Lagodans and unleashing them. He did, however, keep that in the back of his mind as a possibility.

*Ranyos? Can you hear me?*

*Yes, Kymeros*, he thought back. *I have returned to Mariamne.*

*Where are the humans?*

*A few are in Erebus. One is with me. After your attack, they are even more paranoid about the Society than they are with one another.*

*Excellent. How large a force?* Kymeros asked.

*Only a couple squadrons of their soldiers*, Ranyos answered. *They are preparing for war, but are not quite ready yet.*

*Lead J-Par and some of his men to the place you call Erebus,* Kymeros ordered. *As for ensuring conflict will ensue, leave that to me. By the way, it may interest you to know the humans have discovered our gateway. It's now in their compound where they are getting a look at Eurobus.*

*What of the humans under your control? The ones who are in a coma?*

*An insurance policy. If the humans attack us, we can retaliate in their own ranks.*

*But if they cooperate?*

Kymeros shrugged. *Then we can release them. Once this is over, but not until.*

He ended his communication with Ranyos, and turned to his comrades. "We need to hurry things along. The humans are still doing nothing but running their exercises."

“Perhaps some of us could go to their camp,” Phobos suggested. “If we attack them, they may blame the Society. After all, they know nothing of us yet. They will just know othermen are attacking them.”

“No, that won’t do,” the general argued. “The Society will know we aren’t part of their number. We need both sides to blame the other if we want them to fight one another.”

“How about this?” Deimos suggested. “One of us could reverse cocoon, and impersonate a human. I could do that and sneak up on their camp. After stealing some of their clothes, I could slip in the human ranks while they’re talking with the Pilot.”

“Go on.”

“Then Phobos could follow me and sneak into the Society ranks. We start shooting at each other, and chaos ensues.”

Phobos grinned. “At last. Some action.”

“Hmm. Yes, that may well work,” Kymeros conceded. “Very well. Reverse cocoon while we keep monitoring Erebus.”

Deimos nodded, saluted, and went into the barracks. Kymeros had Drallos adjust their portal to a spot away from, but still near Erebus. Then, they sent their spare gateway through.

“This will be how you get back,” Kymeros told Drallos. “Once you come back, we’ll have to destroy it. It would seem I have found a use for our bomb.”

“You could have us plant it there,” Phobos suggested. “Wipe out the Pilot, humans and whatever Society members are there. If that doesn’t kick off a new war, I don’t know what will.”

“No.  We need the human’s weapons.  And their goodwill.  I won’t kill any of them unless I have no other choice.”

The general looked around at his comrades. “Remember our real enemy.”

Drallos emerged in adolescent form just as the Society finally returned to Erebus.  Kymeros and Drallos had been adjusting the portal back and forth to try and see both the campsite and where their agents would go. Once the humans started assembling before a group of landing othermen, Kymeros sent Phobos and Deimos to the agreed entry point.

The two emerged on Garobus.  The sun was out and the weather pleasant.  They stretched and took in the fresh air, even better than the brief visit to Mariamne.

Turning around, they saw their return gate. Nodding at one another, they slowly crept over to the crater's edge. Below, they saw the humans on the other side, talking with the othermen. Since no one was paying attention to them, they ran down the crater walls to the camp.

Deimos stopped at the first tent, and grabbed a pair of pants and shirt from inside. He also found an extra gun. Smiling, he picked it up, and looked down the barrel. It seemed not unlike their own sidearms in operation. Perfect.

Deimos stepped behind the other humans. Phobos had to slowly move around the crater's edge to sneak up behind the othermen. Caution and silence was essential; it would only take one human or otherman to turn around and see them. Then it would be over.

As it was, their enemies and unwitting allies were completely concentrated on one another.

"Colonel Dressler of Earth," the Pilot greeted. "I have brought you a squad of the Queen's favored drones to continue talks with you."

"I am Philos," the largest one told the humans. He had learned English from the thought device before leaving the hive. It seemed only logical, although none of the others had.

"What can we do for you, Philos?" Dressler asked.

Philos waved his head around, taking in their camp. "I see you are testing your weapons. The Pilot also told us he saw a portal materialize near here. Do you know anything about this?"

Dressler raised his chin and kept his tone firm, but not fierce. "We have a gateway to return home. We are also generating a larger one."

"Why?"

"We wish to bring some vehicles to Somnus," Dressler said. "To complete the maneuvers, transport to other areas seemed prudent."

"Only transport?"

"There will be a couple tanks as well."

Philos gave him a blank stare. "Tanks are war vehicles," the human explained. "Yes, they can attack as well as defend."

Dressler looked at the Pilot and othermen behind Philos. "Does it need to come to that, otherman?"

"I should hope not," Philos replied. This time, he puffed himself up. "I still see no purpose in these 'exercises.' We have assured you of our innocence, and

denounced the traitor, Ranyos.  If you surrender him to our custody and depart, there need be no hostility."

"If you allow us to conduct an inspection of your hive and promise us safety while doing so, we will gladly withdraw," Dressler countered.  He couldn't give them Ranyos even if he wanted to.  Nor did he intend on revealing the Deceiver had already returned with Aaron.

"Even though I concede you could just hide what we're looking for, it would show goodwill on your part. And remember, we can run interference on your thought devices, so..."

He was interrupted by shouting on either side of him.  Dressler, Philos, and the Pilot looked to the left.  A soldier was raising his gun and firing into the othermen crowd.  While othermen skin was stronger than human, they had tried to arm themselves accordingly.  The shots still injured rather than killed.

"Stand down soldier!" Dressler shouted.  He couldn't see exactly who it was, but thought he didn’t recognize him.  But that was impossible.  Unless....

The injured otherman cried out and backed away. To the commander's right, an otherman picked up a large bolder and tossed it into the human midst. Then before either commander could shout any more orders, chaos broke out.  Othermen threw stones and some began stalking towards the humans.

A couple of othermen even took to the skies and tried to strike the humans from above.  The humans reacted quickly, shooting into the air. One soldier even drew a grenade, pulled the pin, and threw it.  Othermen flew away, panicked, as it exploded.

During the fighting, Dressler kept enough of his wits about him to see two figures flee the battlefield.  He

shouted after them, but they didn't hear.  Everyone else fought their own duels around him, so they didn't notice.

Dressler watched them before they ran over a hill and out of his site.  Then, he had to fend off an otherman's punch.  As he brandished his own gun, and shot back, he reflected on them.  One looked human, but it was the one he couldn't identify.  The other one looked like an otherman.

When they reached the other side of the hill, Phobos and Deimos paused before the gateway they had sent here.  It would return them to Eurobus, now that their mission was accomplished.

Deimos threw off the hastily stolen clothes and shed the larval skin, the form which looked almost human, particularly from a distance.  Once it was shed, the two othermen looked at each other. Then they turned their

attention to the portal.  Kymeros was there, holding a disintegration bomb.

"Report," their leader ordered.

"The humans and Society are fighting, general," Phobos told him. "It was easy.  They probably would have started anyway."

"Leave nothing to chance," Kymeros warned.  He held up the bomb.  "Return.  This is set to detonate in thirty seconds.  It will cover our tracks."

He tossed the bomb through the door, where it landed at the spies' feet. They dove back through the portal.

## XXV

Drallos probed Arthur Takamori’s mind once more. As he did, he picked up on something.  Arthur was different from several of the other humans.

He had been vaguely aware of this with the Lagodans. Now, the picture became clearer. Humans were divided into groups based on their place of origin, history, and physical features. Arthur was born in the same nation as the others at Mooresville, but his ancestors had originally been born in an eastern nation. Most of the others were from a western continent.

Drallos felt a pang as he remembered the East and West of Garobus. How divided they had been, despite the fact that othermen didn't have the racial diversity of humans. While both worlds had had their differences, and their prejudices among their numbers, the humans had struggled more. Othermen had fought over political ideology, as had humans, but with the latter, things like their build and color had given rivals extra excuses to persecute one another.

Drallos himself remembered his hatred of the East, largely fuelled by his older brother. It wasn't until he met Allree that he ever considered the possibility of goodness in Easterners. And, he learned as he probed, Arthur had this in common with him too.

When younger, he had experienced bullying due to his ethnicity. Later, however, he had entered college and subsequently, a more open minded community. Drallos saw that 'college' was where young humans were educated and trained for their occupations. Not unlike Before, although othermen had done what humans would call elementary education at home.

Takamori had met and befriended Dr. Harlan, which had started his path to Mooresville. He had met, fallen in love with, and married a woman from a different background than he, but it didn't matter to either. They loved one another for who they were.

Drallos felt jealousy then.  Yes, Arthur could have been him, and he could have been Arthur.  They were just born in different times and places.  But this human had been allowed to keep his home. This human still had his mate. Allree had been torn from him by circumstance. Most likely, she had died alone, never knowing what had become of him.

*Hello?*

Drallos heard someone hailing him. He realized it was Arthur.  The human sensed him.  But instead of resistance, like before, he only felt curiosity.  Why? Had the human sensed the otherman's memories, just as Drallos had sensed his?

*Is someone there?* Arthur mentally called again. *Help me.  I'm trapped. I can't get up.*

Drallos mentally withdrew from the human. They couldn't let the humans know what they were doing. Not yet.

"No…don't go…"

Arthur spoke aloud again. But Drallos disconnected the thought device. Some of his comrades looked up, curious. He ignored them, stood, and went to the observation deck. He didn't look at the portals. Instead, he studied Garobus in the heavens. And he reflected on the bitter unfairness of life.

## XXVI

*Report*. Kymeros ordered Ranyos.

*We are all at Mariamne, Kymeros,* he thought. *The humans brought a few of their vehicles to help us. Right now, they are reestablishing contact with Earth. I also have the Scavengers on their way.*

Kymeros nodded. So far, things were proceeding perfectly. Best of all, the time to return to Garobus, at long last, was near.

*Good. The humans in Mooresville are poking around our portal chamber. For now, I'm letting them, but if they do anything to upset our schedule, we can handle it. I'm still keeping several of them in stasis but can awaken them if I have to.*

*The schedule may need to be pushed up anyway,* Ranyos explained telepathically. *Unfortunately, the Pilot discovered our location. If he knows, then Arachne knows.*

*I see. Perhaps complete surprise was too much to hope for. Well, we still have options.*

*One more thing. We discovered a golden egg which had been in cold storage for ages. Perhaps from Before*

*itself. Before anything else could be done, it hatched. A male otherman, golden in color and in excellent health.*

His unseen partner didn't immediately reply. Ranyos waited, and then began to feel nervous. Was Kymeros angry? Should they have left the cold incubator alone? He doubted the humans would have. And, in fairness, Ranyos' own curiosity had equaled theirs.

*Kymeros? Are you there?*

After another pause, he finally got an answer.

*Yes, Ranyos. Keep gathering your allies and await further instructions.*

At last, the othermen arrived on Garobus officially. Kymeros took five of his strongest warriors, including Phobos and Deimos, with him. Drallos and the others he left on Eurobus for the moment. In particular, his brother had seemed disturbed and had grown taciturn.

The general wondered why, but had had no time to question him.

They went to the surface, met with Ranyos and the humans, and went in a formal procession to Mariamne's central building. There, Kymeros disclosed everything, hoping the humans would understand. He wanted them to fight with him willingly, and knowingly. Things didn't go as he had hoped.

## XXVII

Dressler scowled, and turned away. He left the room in a huff. Aaron followed, and Ranyos looked at Kymeros.

"Should you have told them the truth?" he asked hesitantly.

"As a Deceiver, Ranyos, you should have realized by now even the best deception can't hold forever. The

truth always reveals itself in the end.  Ideally, after your goal is met, of course."

"But it hasn't been yet."

"The humans are here," he replied.  "That was the immediate goal.  You did well.  As for the rest, better they learn the real stakes now instead of during the battle.  Now they know what they are fighting for.  And they will fight, Ranyos. Desertion or defeat has been taken off of their table."

"They may try and desert now."

Kymeros turned to a thought device in the lab. Activating it, he transmitted some instructions to his men outside.

"Not for long."

"There is one other thing, Kymeros," Ranyos reminded him. "Remember the golden egg we found in

the medical lab? The young male has continued to grow and will soon reach adulthood."

"Yes you told me about him," Kymeros said. "I knew the scientists had wanted to continue their work, even after the last battle. They were ultimately hoping to create an even greater otherman, better even than you. I hadn't thought they would have had time to succeed."

"I can show you him now, if you wish. We call him Auros. He's being watched over by Ariadne."

"Show me."

When Dressler and Aaron exited the building, J-Par and another of the Outliers grabbed them.

"Hey! What are you…" Aaron began.

"We got an order from the wise ones," J-Par explained. "You are to wait for one of them to escort you to your rooms."

“How did he,” Dressler began.

“The thought device,” Aaron said. “Originally, it was supposed to be used only for communication.”

One of Kymeros’ armored commanders stomped his way out the door. It was Phobos, although the humans hadn’t learned his name yet. No matter; they soon would.

“You,” he addressed the humans and Outliers. “Come with us.”

At first, Aaron and Dressler thought they were going to be dragged away to some dungeon. However, they were led to the other humans. Their guards tensed up when they saw the hulking armored figure approaching. Then, they saw Aaron and Dressler being forcibly led by J-Par, and they cried out in alarm. They raised their guns.

“Men! Quickly!” Dressler began. “Kymeros and Ranyos,”

“Silence!” Phobos barked. J-Par clasped his hand over the colonel’s mouth. The one holding Aaron did the same.

The guards began shooting at the otherman, but the armored commander stepped forward. The bullets bounced harmlessly off the suit. Then, he drew his own sidearm. Firing even stronger ammunition, Phobos killed both humans. Then he raised his voice so nearby othermen could hear.

“To me! Aid your wise ones! Do as they bid you!”

Other Mariamne othermen jumped into the streets and the commander led them into the humans’ makeshift barracks. Humans resting or watching were quickly jolted into action by the commotion, but the Outliers ran forward and began kicking and punching them. A few of

the humans managed to raise their guns.  Shots rang out. An Outlier fell. Aaron and Dressler screamed through otherman hands.  J-Par hissed at them to be quiet.

Phobos ignored them and moved further into the building. Finally, he found what he'd been looking for.  In a side room, the human gateway portal had been set up.

It was activated, and showed the portal room in Mooresville.  Harlan and the agents looked up in shock. He stood and began shouting, but Phobos raised his weapon, and shot the controls.  The image faded, trapping the humans on Somnus.

"Now, you must fight," Phobos told Dressler and company.  "Or else."

"Never," Colonel Dressler retorted.

“Then, we have no choice.  You will be detained, until the victory is won.  We will use your weapons ourselves.”

Kymeros and Ranyos went down to the egg chamber. Next to it was the room where adolescent othermen cocooned and became adults.  They had come looking for Auros, but had been informed he was already starting to cocoon.  Ariadne was with him.  The golden otherman was seated in a corner of the room.  Currently, there were no other cocooning youth, but Auros continued to grow at an accelerated rate.  As Ariadne stood watch over him, he was sweating an opaque waxy substance. From every pore, the film had come forth.  Soon, it would harden into a full cocoon while Auros grew both in size and in form.

He looked up at the approaching males. While not able to stand up, he could still move his head, see and hear. Ranyos suspected Kymeros would only have a few more minutes before the cocoon was complete, however.

“You are the one called Auros,” Kymeros said.

“I am,” the young / older otherman answered.

Kymeros looked him up and down. “What are you? Where did you come from? I don’t remember anything like you from when I was here before.”

“I was here,” Auros told him. “I have always been here.”

He looked at the general and seemed to try and focus. “I was there when you first set yourself upon this path.”

Kymeros didn’t know how to interpret that. So he tried another approach.

“This place was attempting to breed superior othermen.  Or, at least, ones who would survive after the war. Ultimately, they created a race of othermen who functioned as a hive.”

“Like those in the East,” Auros confirmed.

“Yes.  But how could you know?” Kymeros asked. “Those nations, East and West, were long before you hatched.  Even if the egg you came from is that old, no one remembers their egg stage.”

“I told you. I was there.”

“Some of the scientists, Western ones, didn’t want to make a hive, but better individuals.  Ones with enhanced strength, greater mind power, or telepathy without a thought device.  Perhaps they did make one after all? After I left?”

“To learn and to heal honors life,” Auros told him. “And the lights who made life. But to go farther, to take

the secrets of life and death is to walk a path only the lights should. The lights had to step in."

"What am I thinking now?"

"Anger. Confusion.  Desire."

"For what?"

"Freedom."

Kymeros looked at Ranyos and Ariadne. He got no help from them.

"Do you read my mind?" Kymeros asked with a bitter laugh.  "Or does it show on my face?"

"The real question is, does freedom even serve as a real aim?" Auros asked.  "You try to go your own way. But you only go down the same path countless others have.  Away from your source, the light, you just become brutish and depraved.  All the rebels of the past sought freedom.  Individuality.  They all became the same beast."

“And what would you suggest?” Kymeros asked. “You, who would be a wise one, to quote J-Par’s people?”

“Go to the light. Return to your source. Then you won’t be beast, but otherman. Then you become what you were meant to be.”

“Auros…are you the lights?” Ariadne asked quietly.

He looked on her with love in his eyes. “Daughter, you have said it.”

“Deluded,” Kymeros said. “I see the scientists failed after all.”

“But the accelerated growth,” Ranyos began.

“Yes. It’s impressive to start with,” Kymeros conceded. “But with accelerated growth comes accelerated ageing. And all the complications it brings. Including dementia.”

“Auros isn’t mad,” Ariadne protested. “He is wise and good. I know it. I feel it!”

“You wish for a sign?” Auros asked. “Light will shine forth from darkness.”

“What does that mean?” the general demanded.

But Auros didn’t answer. The cocooning material flowed over his head, and he was still. An opaque lump of hardening chitin transforming into…what?

## XXVIII

Kymeros and Ranyos stood in the observation deck in the central building. Below, the tanks rolled on either side of an army of Outliers. J-Par stood in front, along with the armored otherman commanders from Eurobus.

Early this morning, Outlier scouts had reported seeing a large mass of flying othermen. The Society was coming. Carrying makeshift spears and disintegration bombs, they were just now appearing as dots on the horizon. Soon, they would be there, and the last campaign of the Thought War would begin.

Kymeros called every remaining otherman from Eurobus except for Drallos. Even the other astronauts would do their share of fighting. His brother had volunteered to stay behind, and he had the most experiences with the base's thought device. If they needed to attack Mooresville through them again, they would.

As they came into view, the Outliers saw the first wave carrying disintegration bombs. Once close enough, they began dropping them on the ground.

The general signaled his men. "This is Kymeros. Enemy sighted. Fire at will."

The tanks began firing their shells into the mass of flying othermen. They screamed and separated, trying to make a thinner target. Bombs dropped, making craters in the ground. One of the tanks and several othermen on the ground already got vaporized. The

other tank hit a cluster of othermen carrying bombs. These charges detonated in the air, and knocked out several of their opponents. Even better, some of the bombs detonated in air also disintegrated other bombs. As had been hoped, the Society's deadliest weapons were being taken out early.

But some more still reached the ground, taking out Outliers and J-Par's fighters. The Society flew towards the city, and the snipers opened fire. Othermen fell, and they were forced to fly away.

As they did, Outliers took to the skies and several duels began. Ranyos saw both the Pilot and Arachne herself at the rear of the flying army. They fell back, and landed at a point far away but still within sight of the fighting. The fact they were here at all spoke to their desperation.

J-Par led a charge along the ground. He saw the same thing Ranyos had, and took the opportunity of possibly capturing or killing the queen herself. Drones came forward to protect her.

J-Par and his charge jumped in the air. Employing the same kicks, flips and somersaults, they knocked the Society drones out of the sky. Philos recognized them from the earlier encounter. Now, though, he had a weapon in his spear. Snarling, he charged J-Par and grazed the otherman's eye, leaving a cut and drawing blood.

J-Par howled in pain. The others heard his cry. With a collective shout of indignation, they abandoned their individual duels, sprang upon Philos, and trampled him underfoot.

Arachne cried out, wailing at the loss of her favorite. She ran forward then, no longer content to be shielded.

Using her greater size and strength, she sprang forth, tackling two of J-Par's fighters. The Pilot ran behind her, and had to fend off the kicks and blows of their opponents. He was still trying to merely defend himself, but the queen was out for blood.

J-Par wiped the blood from his injured eye and saw Arachne pummeling two Outliers at a time. He whistled shrilly for them to retreat. Then he turned and ran / jumped away, back towards the fields below the city. Here, he would regroup and rejoin the main attack.

"After them!" Arachne called to her remaining drones when the Outliers withdrew. "Don't let the murder of Philos go unavenged."

"We're with you, queen," Cephus told her.

They all followed the Outliers back into the fray. Because of multiple duels still occurring in the air, and because of the human weapons offering cover fire, they

were forced to run. J-Par and his fellows met up with Phobos. He strode forward, and began shooting.

The Pilot made a brief, low flight to go over the heads of his comrades. Now, he could put himself between them and the Othermen of Eurobus. Phobos fired his shots at the robot, but his metal body had been built for rough spaceflight in an asteroid destroying craft. The projectiles bounced harmlessly off of him.

In the egg chamber, Ariadne waited for Auros to emerge from his cocoon. She heard the sounds of the battle outside and wanted to flee down further underground. The other females had already moved the eggs, incubators and larva to the lowest subbasement rooms in the city.

She wished they had done so initially. But these rooms were both more spacious and closer to the

medical wing.  The lowest rooms were small, cramped and dark storage areas.

She wanted to go there now, hot and uncomfortable as it may be.  At least it would be safer.  But she couldn’t leave Auros while he was still an immobile, vulnerable chrysalis.  She still didn’t know exactly what he was.  He had all but claimed to be an avatar of the lights themselves.

Maybe they weren’t just some phenomenon after all, but a form of intelligent life? And if so, were they, or he, actually a god, or the God? Or just another form of alien life, like the humans?

But he seemed so far above both men and othermen. Not only because of his accelerated growth.  Just his presence suggested to her she was with someone beyond science, beyond the nature where men and othermen lived their lives.

She heard a crack, and looked up.  A fissure was forming in the cocoon.  She breathed a sigh of mingled relief and anticipation. Auros' accelerated growth manifested itself once again. Good.  Now they could flee and be safe.

## XXIX

J-Par and the Outliers faced an angry queen, flanked by her drones.  They came forth, redoubling their fighting.  Cephus found himself ducking a blow from the Outlier chief.  Although both sides had made inroads on the battlefield, both were evenly matched.  A quick victory wasn't happening with either group.

Then, a roar pierced the air.

Arachne turned to the western horizon and froze. About a dozen Scavengers were heading straight towards them. Sage led the charge.

“Brothers! We are here!” the giant otherman bellowed.

The Outliers cried out in joy at the same time the Society othermen did in dismay. Some flew up into the air, but still had to contend with the snipers and the tank.

Sage charged forward, grabbing a drone. Shaking it in his fist, he threw it into the air. Colliding with another group of the Society, at least three fell from the sky, dead or wounded.

“Protect the queen!” Cephus called to the other drones. They formed a perimeter around Arachne and the Pilot. Sage and a couple other Scavengers closed in

on the tightly knit group.  Other Scavengers joined battle alongside the Outliers.

“Giant!” Phobos shouted.  “If you’re with us, capture the queen and Pilot.  Don’t kill them!”

“Who you?” Sage asked.  He saw the armored figure out of the corner of his eye, but didn’t know what to make of him.

“Sage, it’s me, J-Par,” the chief said.  “Take them to the central tower.  Understand? Brother Ranyos is there.”

“Brother!”

That Sage understood.  He batted away the drones before him. Cephus tried to strike Sage with his spear, but another Scavenger got in the way.  The Scavenger roared with anger and pain as the spear hit his knee.

Cephus and the other drones rushed forward.  They struck the giant with their weapons, gradually bringing

him down.  Sage managed to reach into the crowd of drones, and grabbed Arachne and the Pilot in each hand. They screamed and he laughed.  Then, he turned and ran for the hill.

The drones followed, but had to fight against the third Scavenger in the group.  Some of them took to the air, but fire from the guns and the tank took several out. Flying othermen met the rest in the air, and more on both sides fell.  By the time Cephus could see clearly through the opponents again, the Scavenger and his prisoners had entered the city.

Sage walked up to the central building.  Armored othermen took them from the giant and dismissed him. As the giant went back to the battle, he saw Ranyos among the Eurobus othermen.

“Brother!  Good! Sage fight.”

“You’ve done well, brother,” Ranyos told him. “Go now and help our other brother, J-Par.”

“Where is Aaron?”

Ranyos paused. It would be too much to explain to the Scavenger, so he only pointed upward.

“At the top. You can’t fit, but I will send him at the end of the battle. Now go. We still need you.”

Sage nodded and lumbered back down the street. Arachne glowered at him. The Pilot, however, found himself impressed, in spite of everything. Ranyos had united groups cast off by the Society. Groups which had had no place among them. In a sense, he had proven himself a better leader than the queen.

“Ranyos,” Arachne growled. “What have you done? In days, you have torn down what took millennia to build. And for what? You had every advantage! I loved you! I…”

Ranyos turned and showed her his back. Arachne stopped speaking. She looked at the Pilot, but the robot had no guidance to give her. The commanders forced the Pilot and queen to look at Ranyos for a long moment. Then their enemy led the party up the stairs to the observation room on the top floor.

Kymeros waited for them. The Pilot noted Aaron, Dressler, and the humans locked in an alcove serving as a makeshift cell. An energy shield had been placed there to hold the humans. But they could see and hear everything.

“Now do you believe us?” the Pilot asked, speaking at last.

“Pilot. I see you have survived this long,” Kymeros said. “Surprising.”

“I could say the same for you, Kymeros,” the robot answered.

“Who are you?” Arachne demanded. “Don’t you know who I am? As queen, I demand you release me and turn Ranyos over.”

Kymeros slapped her. She would have been knocked to the floor, but the guards held her up.

“Queen, you are deposed,” Kymeros answered. He drew his gun.

Arachne’s bluster evaporated. She saw not only the weapon but the person wielding it. She knew then she wouldn’t live more than a few moments, and felt fear grip her. Not only for herself, but for the Society as well. What would happen to it without her? Is this how the solution to the Thought War would end? In chaos and bloodshed?

“Ranyos!” she found herself shouting. “Ranyos, don’t do this. Think of the world; think of me! I’m sorry! Ranyos!”

And Ranyos thought back several years. Before Kymeros or the humans. Before Ariadne. Before he had met the Outliers. Yes, there had been a time when they had loved one another. When she had been kind, instead of cruel. Tender instead of harsh. Once, they had shared life and common goals.

Then she had severed his wings. Steeling himself, he turned his back on her for the last time. He heard the shot. Then no one would hear the voice of Arachne ever again.

“Toss her out the window,” Kymeros ordered his men. “Let the Society see their queen. Then they will lose heart. The battle will be over.”

He looked at the Pilot. “As for you, you can join the humans. Your knowledge and experience could yet prove useful.”

“What makes you think I’ll help you after this?”

“Because you hold life worth preserving.”

“Something we clearly don’t have in common.”

In silence, Ranyos watched the Pilot be put in the cell. Another of Kymeros’ men dragged Arachne’s body to the window. He threw it out, and all would see the fall of the Society’s queen.

In the lower level, Auros shook off his cocoon. Ariadne had been sitting on the ground, waiting. When he emerged, she stood and beheld the now adult otherman. He looked like the typical baseline otherman, apart from his golden color.

“Auros, thank goodness,” she told him. She reached out and took his hand. “Come, we must get to the sub basement. The battle still rages outside.”

Auros gently took his hand out of hers. “Ariadne. Thank you for staying with me. But you must go to the

shelter alone.  The world, and your children, will need you.”

“But what about you?”

“I head to my task.  You to yours.”

He looked at her one more time.  What she saw in his eyes, she understood not.  But it compelled her to hug him tightly.  Maybe if she held him, he wouldn’t have to go.

But go he had to, and eventually, she released him. He left the room and began climbing the stairs.  She watched him go, and then went down to the sub basement.

XXX

The Society watched in horror as Arachne fell from the window.  They had been trying to fight their way through the Outliers and Scavengers to rescue her.  Of the Pilot, they saw no trace.

So they would need to rescue him and avenge their queen. Or they would avenge both, if the Pilot was dead too.

For they couldn't think of the Pilot as anything but a person. He had long ago proven he wasn't a mere machine. He too was of the Society, and the Society protected their own.

Although devastated at their loss, Cephus led them on. If the Outliers thought they'd scatter and surrender just because Arachne was dead, they were in for a surprise. First, avenge her and finish this battle. Then another queen could be created later.

Sage lumbered back out and began descending the hill. Cephus raised his spear and charged. Before the giant could get out of the way, the drone stabbed him in the shoulder.

Sage roared and reared up. Cephus tried to hold onto his weapon, but Sage's convulsions tore it out of his hand. Sage pried it out of his flesh and tossed it aside. His arm hung at the side, but he raised his other fist and ran forward.

Kymeros heard the sound of footsteps. Raising his weapon, he watched the doorway. Surely their foes hadn't managed to make it this far.

But no Society otherman stepped through. Instead, a golden being approached. Without him saying anything, Kymeros knew it was Auros.

The appearance of him fully grown both frightened and intrigued him. Had the ancient scientists succeeded after all? Was this the end result? An otherman with both true telepathy and near invulnerability?

There was one way to tell. Before Auros could say anything, Kymeros shot him. Auros went sprawling, and Ranyos cried out in surprise.

“Why did you do that?” he demanded.

“A test,” Kymeros said, frowning. He didn’t like being questioned, particularly by the Society traitor. While Ranyos had proven useful, part of him still disliked and distrusted any traitor.

The general signaled two of his men. They pulled up the golden otherman, who looked at Kymeros. Dazed, but unhurt.

“Amazing,” Kymeros said. He reached out and touched Auros’ chest. He could find no evidence of any wound.

“No,” Auros confirmed. “No flesh and blood being can harm me.”

“Then, will you fight for us? Destroy the Society?”

“I am the light.  You would bring forth darkness.”

“Put him away with the Pilot and humans.  Later, we’ll study him.”

Auros didn’t resist as he was put in the cell with the Pilot and humans.

“Auros, are you all right?” Aaron asked.  “What happened?”

“Ariadne is safe with the women and children,” he told them.  “But the battle continues.  Darkness falls.”

Outside the cell, Kymeros and Ranyos watched the battle.  Both the Outliers and Society threw themselves into it.  But neither could get a clear advantage over the other.  Then, the general noted his snipers stopped shooting.

He went to the thought device and used it to contact his men.  He seemed to be listening, but was in fact communicating telepathically.  Then he nodded, walked

over to the makeshift cell, and addressed Colonel Dressler.

“Your guns have run out of ammunition,” he told the human. “Will you secure more from your home base?”

“Will you release us and let us return home?” Dressler countered.

“I’m giving the orders. Do as I say, and you may yet see your own sun once more.”

“I’m not helping you, general,” the colonel repeated.

“Then you will suffer the consequences.” He looked over his shoulder. “Ranyos. Activate the thought device embedded in the gate. Have our human hostages attack the Mooresville installation.”

“Ranyos, no!” Aaron called out. He looked imploringly at the otherman. “You wanted justice, not vengeance. Not wholesale slaughter.”

Ranyos hesitated. That was true. This battle had proven longer and bloodier than he had thought. What was more, he hadn't felt the satisfaction he thought he'd feel over Arachne's death. Instead of thinking about his punishment, he had instead been thinking on all which had led to this. Could things have been different? Could they be different now?

His gaze flickered over to Auros. The golden otherman met his stare. Ranyos felt he could become lost in the depths of those eyes. Or been seen through and laid bare by them. Then, he saw something else there.

He saw light.

Ranyos knew what he had to do.

"No, Kymeros. I will not."

Kymeros whirled on him. "You would disobey me?" he demanded. "I command you, Deceiver! Don't forget it

was I who made your plans for you. I taught you how to build the gates. I encouraged you to bring the outliers together. Without me, you would still be wandering aimless in the desert. You owe me your allegiance."

"Not if you plan to kill the innocent," Ranyos answered.

Kymeros slapped him. Because he was stronger, the blow sent Ranyos sprawling. Kymeros went over and kicked him.

"Get up!" Kymeros ordered. "You will obey! Deceiver!"

Ranyos didn't stand. "It's not how you start. It's how you end."

"Then, I'll end it myself."

He grabbed Ranyos and walked to the observation window. Without a second thought, he chucked the wingless otherman out. Then he activated the thought

device and ordered Drallos to send the Lagodans on a suicide mission.  Kill everyone in sight.

Drallos listened to his brother and offered no argument.  Not only did he not want to join Ranyos, for he saw Kymeros' resolve, but he had no love for the humans anyway.  He didn't even care anymore about Arthur.  Let him lose what he had.  It would be no worse than Drallos' own fate.

Ranyos fell, he knew, to his death.  Before he hit the ground, he thought on the lights.  He mentally implored them to save his world.  For Ariadne.  For their children.

Arthur sat up in bed with a gasp.  Rachel looked up and cried out in surprise and joy.  He had finally

awakened.  And so were the others, from the looks of things.

“Arthur!” she exclaimed. “Don’t get up; you’ve been under for…”

Arthur and the others shouted and grabbed their heads.  Then, they began pulling out their IV lines and starting to stand.  The other medical staff tried to calm the agitated patients as well.  They were shoved away for their trouble.

Arthur himself grabbed Rachel by the shoulders. She looked in his eyes and didn’t see the man she loved. Instead, she saw rage. And the desire to hurt and kill.

Arthur took one hand off of her and drew back his fist.

“Arthur…it’s me,” she said, desperately trying to reach him.  She put a hand on her stomach.  “It’s us. Your family.  We love you.”

The rage cleared, and Arthur returned. “Ra… Rachel?”

Then, he pushed her away and grabbed his head.

“No! I won’t!”

He shook once, and seemed to be forcing something unseen away from him. Then he looked up. “We have to get…out…”

The other patients began fighting. Lashing out with their hands and feet, some of them attacked the orderlies, who did their best to fight back. Others contented themselves with smashing equipment at their bedsides.

“Thought device…” Arthur said, straining. “I feel it.”

“Where?” Rachel asked. She put his arm over her shoulder and walked him out of the infirmary. Behind

them, she heard glass shatter. Arthur pointed down the hallway, towards the portal room.

Ross and Hailey came running up.

“What’s happening?” Hailey asked.

“The patients are awake and attacking again,” Rachel said.

“Thought device,” Arthur repeated.

“The alien gate,” Ross said, understanding. “The extra electronics. It’s built into the gateway! The portal is the thought device!”

They went into the portal room. The technicians there were holding their heads. Ellis seemed to have grasped what was happening, and adjusted the interference generator. However, this time, the thought device in the gate intensified its signal.

Ross and Hailey tried to pull out their guns. If they couldn’t interfere with it, they’d destroy it. But the

interference broke down, the signal intensified, and they all stopped in their tracks.

Rachel let Arthur go to clutch at her own head. She felt the murderous thoughts enter her head, and it was all she could do to hold onto her own sanity. Outside, she heard shots in the hallway. They were coming.

## XXXI

Sage watched the tower. He heard something being thrown off the top floor. Craning his neck, he saw it was none other than Ranyos. The Deceiver hit the ground, not too far from Arachne's body. Of course, he died instantly.

Sage howled with anger and dismay. "Brother!"

The other Outliers felt their own hearts sink. Had these warriors, supposedly from Eurobus, betrayed them? What had they gotten themselves into? J-Par, in

particular, felt as though the hope and faith they had put into the wise ones had been dashed.

Ranyos had been called a Deceiver. Kymeros, however, had proven himself the true false prophet.

“Brother!” Sage called again. Then, he reached for the nearest armored otherman, which happened to be Phobos. He scooped the protesting warrior up and crushed him in his clenched fist.

Cephus saw this, as well as an opportunity. He shouted at J-Par.

“Outliers! Your masters have turned on you. Join with us and we can talk peace.”

He shouted at the nearest Society othermen. “Attack the armored ones only! I repeat, break off the attacks on the Outliers!”

Cephus led a charge of drones against two more of Kymeros’ men. They shot at the Society, and a couple of

drones fell.  Cephus himself was hit in the forearm. Pushing through the pain, he continued forward. He stabbed Deimos, and some other drones killed the second one.  Then they went for other armored soldiers.

The Scavengers attacked the remaining tank.  With their bare hands, they bent the gun barrel, rendering it useless.  Then they flipped t over and began pounding the machine's frame.

J-Par called to his fellows.  The Society drone was right.  They had been manipulated and betrayed.  So they leaped into the fray, coming up behind the same armored warriors attacking Cephus' group.

From the observation deck, Kymeros couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had killed Ranyos in a moment of anger, but would have never guessed this would result.  The Outliers, all of them, suddenly joined

the Society in fighting his men. The large, stupid ones disabled the other human vehicle. One of them ran up to Ranyos' body, wailing and shouting. As if the brute actually cared for the Deceiver.

So, it had come to this. The world he'd returned to, the one he'd hoped to properly rebuild, had turned on him. As he saw his old commanders being picked off one by one, he realized the world he knew was truly long dead. These savages, these fools, were all that were left.

Well, perhaps he could yet salvage something. After ending this battle. Yes. Destroy these, and restart the world with the women and children in the shelter. They would properly submit to him. They would have to.

*Drallos*, he called out telepathically.

*I'm here, general*, his commander on Eurobus answered. *How goes the battle?"*

*All is lost unless you initiate Total Eclipse.*

There was a pause. *Has it come to that?*

*It has. Obey me!*

*I hear and obey.*

In space, the planetoid known alternatively as Phaeton and Eurobus began to drift closer to Somnus. The engine put on its surface long ago to steer it fired, sending a plume of fire into the void. While there was no danger of crashing into the planet, such was the precision of the ancient device, it would further block the sun on the surface. And cause more interesting effects as well.

The wind picked up, and the sky darkened. The othermen all looked overhead at the sky. What they saw filled them with awe, confusion, and increasing terror.

The speck in the sun that was Phaeton seemed to grow. What had at first only been a comparatively minor shadow soon filled up the sky completely over the sun. What this meant, of course, was Phaeton had come much closer to Somnus than it ever had naturally.

And with closer proximity came a larger tug of gravity. The wind began to howl. All othermen who were still flying had to land in order to keep from being swept away.

The ground began to shake. Sage threw himself on the corpses of Ranyos and Arachne to protect them. J-Par lost his balance and fell on his back. Cephus and his company were forced to their knees. Lightning flashed and a sandstorm could be seen forming in the distance. It felt as though the world was trying to come apart.

In the tower, the rumble could also be felt. Kymeros and his guards struggled to remain standing. But a tremor rocked the room, knocking the shield generator over.

The force field holding the humans, Pilot and Auros collapsed. Before the othermen could recover, Dressler ran out.

“Now’s our chance,” he called over his shoulder. “Come on!”

The humans tackled the armored othermen. They tried to fight back, but the shaking kept them off balance. Several of their weapons, including a dagger, went sprawling. Auros silently picked it up and looked around.

The Pilot had not joined the fighting humans. Instead, he went to the observation deck and looked out along the plain. All the death and destruction he saw

made him hang his head.  Were he organic, the robot may well have cried.

“Listen to me,” he heard a voice say.  Looking behind him, he saw Auros approaching.  “I will tell you the truth.”

“Truth?” the Pilot echoed.  “What is truth?  In less than a day, everything I ever tried to do came undone.”

“Life is precious and must be preserved,” Auros said.

His first lesson.  But how had he known?

“All in vain,” the Pilot told the golden otherman. “It was all for nothing.”

“Not yet.”

The Pilot had never known such despair. Not even Before had seemed so bleak.  Then, there had been a plan.  A plan which had, until now, worked.  Now, he felt no plan would ever work again.

“Go, Auros,” the Pilot said. “Save yourself, if you can. You can’t be killed.”

“Not by hands of flesh,” Auros said. “But you, while a being with a soul, are not flesh.”

He handed the dagger over to the robot. “You can kill me.”

“Why? Will the end not come soon enough, as it is?” the Pilot asked. Disbelief was in his voice. “You would use me to commit suicide?”

For even in this despairing moment, the Pilot did not consider either homicide or suicide. Come what may, life was still too precious for him to do either. Though he did not realize it, it meant despair had not consumed him entirely after all.

“Not suicide. Release,” Auros answered. “A release of my power. The power to right this wrong. The answer to this darkness is light.”

The Pilot looked at him. In the otherman's eyes, he saw lights. The same lights which had given him his life once. Long ago, out in space. The Pilot recognized Auros for what he was.

"What will happen, then?" he asked.

"You will be with me. Always. But you must trust."

The ground continued to rumble. Outside, storms were picking up and would soon drown out the remaining warriors on both sides. He had to act now.

Slowly, the Pilot raised the dagger. Kymeros caught sight of them.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Down came the Pilot's hand. The dagger pierced Auros. But instead of blood, light streamed out of him. Lights engulfed both the golden otherman and the robot. Then it began to expand. The humans felt themselves knocked to the ground.

The three armored othermen also fell to the floor. Their armor scattered when it hit. But the humans saw all the suits were empty. The bodies of Kymeros and his guards had completely disintegrated.

Outside, the light continued to expand. From the top of the tower, it traveled out like a shockwave. Overhead, the wave of light hit Phaeton. As if struck with a giant fist, the planetoid was pushed away from Somnus. Accelerating towards the sun, the shadow shrank, and daylight returned. The wind ceased, and the sand fell back down, creating new dunes. Phaeton fell into the sun and vaporized.

On Earth, the alien gateway sparked and burned out. When it would be later inspected, the humans would discover the circuits had melted beyond any

recognition.  As it deactivated, all the people in the Mooresville installation felt their minds clear.

Rachel felt hung over, but otherwise alive and intact. She looked over at her husband. “Arthur?”

They were both still on the ground.  Arthur gathered her up in his arms and held her close.  “It’s over,” he whispered.

## XXXII

The Outliers and Society made their way into Mariamne.  The women and children came back out when the tremors had ceased. While Ariadne led one group in replacing the eggs back in their incubators, another opened up the medical wing.  The wounded, on both sides, were treated.  J-Par had a patch made for his ruined eye, while Sage and Cephus both had their arms bandaged and splinted.

Aaron, Dressler, and the humans helped where they could. Since they didn't know enough about othermen anatomy to help treat the wounded, they instead gathered up the many dead. While Dressler had wanted to make a mass grave, Aaron convinced him to lay the dead on the new dunes. So, side by side, in rows on their backs, the casualties were placed. The othermen respected and appreciated this. Their custom was to expose their dead in this way, rather than 'pollute' the soil by burials.

Ironically, Ranyos and Arachne were laid to rest close to one another. The humans took another day to rest. Then, they approached Cephus and Ariadne. By default, these two were recognized as the leaders of the Society and Outliers.

"We need to return home," Aaron told them in their language. "We don't belong here."

“No,” Ariadne agreed. “We should be able to adjust the gateway to get you home.”

She looked at them with sadness. “Thank you, Aaron Adams, for honoring Ranyos. Even after everything, I did love him.”

“He said it isn’t how you start, but how you end that matters,” Aaron told her.

“So, what will you do now?” Dressler asked. “Will you continue to fight, or try something better?”

“I will return my people to the hive,” Cephus answered. He, too, spoke English. “The Pilot is gone, but his chamber remains. We can use the hormones to make a new queen. The Society will continue.”

“There must be no more disintegration bombs,” J-Par said. “No use of the thought device, except for education.”

“Distribute the helmets far and wide,” Dressler suggested. “If all have the advantage, then no one has an unfair advantage.”

“I don’t know how much Ranyos told you,” Aaron said to Ariadne. “But both he and you are essentially Before othermen. Chances are, most of the other Outliers are too.”

“What is your point?” Cephus said.

“Even with the hormones, the Society may or may not last forever. I think it behooves you both to start working together, rather than be enemies or even isolationists.”

“Perhaps,” Cephus looked at J-Par and Ariadne. “Perhaps if any Outlier wants to join the Society, we should let them. Our numbers have fallen after this war.”

“And any of the Society who wants to be an Outlier could be,” Ariadne replied. “Let othermen decide their place rather than be forced into one of the other.”

“If we did that,” J-Par remarked. “Then, eventually, there wouldn’t be two peoples. Rather, one people in two places.”

The three looked at one another. Sage, who had been listening from the side, came up. He held out his unbandaged hand.

“All be brothers,” he said. “Yes.”

J-Par, Ariadne, and Cephus each took a turn clasping the Scavenger’s hand. “All be brothers,” they repeated. Aaron and Dressler smiled.

They later went to the computer lab. Some adjustments on the now empty monitor and they were able to pull up the basement in Lagoda. The dinghy

house had never looked so beautiful as Aaron and Colonel Dressler led the other humans home.

## Epilogue

Several months later, Kel Jamison was in the Main Street Pub. On the television screen, he saw a computer animated video of a human fighting winged, bug like monsters.

“Legend of the One Ship,” the announcer voiced over. “Rated T for teen.”

Andre Jackson grunted and began polishing the bar with a dirty rag. “Gamers,” he muttered under his breath.

“So, as I was saying,” Kel continued. “I know Mooresville Gaming pulled a publicity stunt. But I’ve

still been hearing rumors.  Is it true a bunch of people in Lagoda disappeared for like a month, or something?”

Andre looked at the reporter’s empty glass.  Kel picked up the hint, and handed him his credit card. Andre rang him up, returned the card, and poured him another beer.

“People in Lagoda keep to themselves,” he told Kel.

Rachel was in the infirmary.  This time, she wasn’t the physician, but the patient. She smiled on the newborn baby in her arms. Arthur sat in a chair next to her bed, and leaned in to hug her.  Aaron, Keisha and Ellis stood by the bedside, happy for their friends.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Ellis asked.  “Life, I mean.”

“It is,” Aaron agreed.  “Even after all we saw.”

“I’m both relieved and envious I wasn’t there, this time,” Keisha remarked. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like.”

“Light overcoming darkness,” Aaron said. “Light sacrificing itself. Or Himself. I wonder…does the same thing happen on all worlds?”

“Only time will tell,” Ellis said. “Maybe we’ll one day go back there. Maybe we’ll find someplace completely different.”

“I don’t feel any need,” Rachel spoke up. “There’s enough beauty and wonder right here.”

On Somnus, Ariadne led her young larva outside for the first time. All her eggs had hatched, along with those of many other females. A large new generation had come into the world. They would require her full attention, even more than the beginning diplomacy.

She pointed to the mound where their father lay. Then she walked them over to the east side of the hill. Where Auros had told the farmers to plant had grown into the largest harvest she had ever seen. More than enough to feed them all.

The lights still watched over them. She was certain. And in the lights, there could be no darkness.

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